

A person is rappelling down a waterfall in a rocky canyon. The waterfall is cascading over dark, layered rock formations. The person is wearing a red helmet and a backpack, and is secured by a rope. The surrounding area is lush with green vegetation, including trees and ferns. The sky is clear and blue.

# SCOTTISH CANYONS

Danny Watts

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# Scottish Canyons

Danny Watts



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# Foreword

As kayaking developed in Scotland in the early 90s, the hunt for steeper rivers began. The race was on to get as many first descents as possible, ticking off new waterfalls or steep-sided gorges hidden all over Scotland, but as kayakers started to explore into tighter and steeper rivers, we found ourselves starting to abseil sections of rivers and lower our boats down. Eventually there were rivers that were left untamed by a kayak, and so began the sport of canyoning in Scotland.

Of course, research was a lot harder back then. Without the luxury of the internet most rivers were found by OS map and then scouted on foot. This new sport of canyoning allowed us to access steeper more remote canyons, enjoying the pioneering feel of it all, discovering the thrill of another new jump or slide hidden away. Canyoning in Scotland has developed a lot since then, as it has around the world. We only started adding infrastructure into the canyons of Scotland in the year 2000, helping to make them more accessible for people to explore the variety of canyons Scotland has to offer.

Thankfully, Danny has now made an amazing job of collecting all the information for this guidebook, I hope you enjoy it and the experiences canyoning will bring you.

Rig and rap safe! – Ben Starkie.



📷 Ben Starkie – Photo: Nadi Khan



# Acknowledgements

A huge thank you must go to my friends over the years who have joined me all around Scotland to descend these cold canyons and collect information to help bring this guidebook to fruition – Gavin Branter, Mathew Burden, Michael Ayles, Jessica Acheson, Bryony Brooks, Scott Gibson, Mitch Craig, Steve McNeil, Intrepidus and many more.

A special thank you to Ben Starkie, Olly Baylis, Andy Taylor, Rhian Anthony, and John Stewart, for all their help in creating this guidebook.

Also, thanks to Mum & Gal for all their help over the years in many ways.

Finally, the biggest thank you to Ellie Raymond for her amazing patience and support while I would not stop talking about canyoning.

## **Photographic acknowledgements**

Photos are by the author except where acknowledged in the captions. A special thanks to The Adventure Photographers for their spectacular photographs of so many of the canyons.

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📷 Big jump (Route 34)

- The Adventure Photographers

# Introduction

Scotland, a country famously known for the beautiful highlands, its delicious single malt whisky and, of course, the 'dreich' weather. There are many outdoor activities that can be pursued, from rock climbing and hiking in the mountains to kayaking in the rivers or around the coastline. The sport of canyoning, however, is relatively new here and its development has been hindered, until now, by the lack of a guidebook.

This guidebook has been created for both experienced canyoneers and for those who have just started to delve into this adventurous sport. Here you will find information about some of the best canyons and gorges Scotland has to offer. There are 47 Scottish routes to explore, ranging from beautiful entry-level gorge-walks to committing and challenging canyon descents. Each route has been placed into one of four regions:

Far North & Isles, West Coast, Central and Southern.

***“In Scotland there is no such thing as bad weather –  
Only the wrong clothes.” – Billy Connolly***

# What is Canyoning?

Have you ever been out hiking in the mountains and seen a series of beautiful waterfalls disappearing into a steep sided-gorge and wondered "What's down there?"

This is where 'Canyoning' comes in!

Canyoning is an adventurous sport that follows the path of a stream down the mountain side – usually in steep-sided gorges, through cold plunge pools and over tumbling waterfalls. This extreme sport requires a combined range of skills to overcome the obstacles along the river path; from abseiling to jumping, scrambling, climbing, sliding, and swimming. When you put all of this together, it enables you to explore a harsh yet outstanding environment where few have ever been before.

Of course, all of this can make canyoning an extremely dangerous activity and should not be something you just 'have a go at'! As with climbing or caving, if you are new to the sport, you should seek advice and training from professionals first. In the UK, you can look to the UKCA (UK Canyoning Association) for training courses throughout the year on [www.ukcanyoning.org](http://www.ukcanyoning.org). They offer introductory lessons that help you begin your journey into the sport of canyoning, or more advanced courses for the experienced canyoneer wanting to tackle harder canyons in Scotland or abroad. You may also want to check out the V7 Academy which has in-depth online training videos on [www.v7academy.com](http://www.v7academy.com) – a great place to start learning the basics to the sport of canyoning and develop more advanced techniques.



The canyoning season in Scotland can theoretically be all year round, but a lot of people may choose to refrain from descending into ice-cold waterfalls and brain-freezing plunge pools in the depths of winter, and I don't blame them. So, with that said, the best months for canyoning in Scotland are from April to October.

# Warning – Canyoning is a Dangerous Activity

The canyon routes detailed in this guidebook are intended for the use of an experienced audience; either dedicated canyoneers or outdoor enthusiasts with transferable skills. Canyoning comes with very real risks which often relate specifically to the sport. Practicing safe canyoning requires you to have good judgment based on your personal skills and a realistic understanding of your experience and limitations before choosing to descend any route. Even those with many years' experience in mountaineering or rock-climbing should assess their skill-set before descending canyon routes as many techniques used in canyoning are specific to the sport and not used elsewhere.

Hazards within a canyon can change constantly, and this guidebook cannot keep you safe from these dangers. Over time, anchors for abseils can become damaged or removed by floods and snowmelt, deep pools can fill up with debris or silt from a storm or landslides, hydroelectric dams can be built which can change the flow of the canyon or cause flash flooding. With this knowledge, you must always be prepared for these changes and learn the skills to overcome any new circumstances.

There is no substitute for undertaking a training course in canyoning to learn the necessary skills required to safely descend these routes. An introduction to the risks of the sport and basic techniques used can be seen in the 'Flash Flood Awareness', 'Safety and Planning', 'Equipment' and 'Techniques' sections at the beginning of the book.

## Emergency contacts

In case of an emergency, call 999 and ask for the Police then Mountain Rescue.

### Important notice

Although great care has been taken by the author to ensure all information contained within this book is as accurate as possible at the time of writing, the author and Pesda Press do not take any responsibility in connection with the use of the information given in this guidebook. It is your own personal decision as to whether to descend a gorge / canyon or not.

# How to Use this Guidebook

This guidebook includes some of the best canyoning routes that have been discovered and explored within Scotland.

## Star rating

As you look through the different canyons and gorges detailed, you will see a star rating given to each route. While every route has its own merits, the use of a 4-star rating system helps to distinguish the difference in quality. This rating system considers the natural beauty of the canyon and the level of thrill it may offer with a normal level of water, but as always, assessing quality comes down to a matter of opinion and these ratings are only a guide.

## Grade

The grade given to each canyon route is based on the hardest section(s) of the canyon with a normal level of water. This is always subject to change; higher water levels can create different hazards or anchors could be missing which may create a difficult rigging situation.

## Location

Each canyon route has been named by the first team to descend it, but the river itself has a name; it's mentioned on each route so you can double check you are in the right place. Map coordinates have also been given to mark the start and end of each canyoning route. These are given as Grid References for use with OS maps and Latitude and Longitude to 4 decimal points which should work with any GPS system.

## Timings

There is an approach, descent and return time given with each route. These times are only estimates, based on a team of four competent canyoneers who have not descended the route before. An approximate canyon length is also detailed to give you an idea of the size of the route. These pieces of information will help you to plan your trip accordingly and to avoid any major surprises.

## Abseil length

You will also see that the longest abseil is noted on each route. With this information you can assess the rope lengths required for each canyon, but be sure to check each description in more detail as there may be variations. The length given is only an approximation and is not an exact measurement.

## Reading the topographic maps

Topos are a simplified graphical cross-section of a canyon that highlight the main features of the route. There are a number of topos in this guidebook to help you understand what you will find on specific routes. Not all routes in this book have a topographic map; this may be because of the simpler nature of the given route or because the majority of the route involves gorge-walking with only a few key features that will be mentioned in the description.

Using the symbols located on the legend given on the inside back cover, you will be able to read these topographic maps and gain a better understanding of what you will encounter when descending the canyon route.

### Please note

Only the main features of the canyon have been included on the topos. During the sections of gorge-walking you may still discover unmapped features that you will be required to navigate under your own judgement. Canyons are constantly changing; you should always check landing pools for debris and depth before jumping or tobogganing to prevent any serious injuries.

### Helpful tip

If you are carrying a waterproof digital camera into the canyon, you should take photos of the canyon route and maps from this book to have as a reference on your approach and during your descent.





## **Far North & Isles**

Arguably the best place to go to enjoy a day or two of adventure canyoning. In the North you'll find some of the biggest canyons and gorges to sink your teeth into, some of which consist of a different rock type to most of the Scottish canyons. The Isle of Skye of course has the famous 'Fairy Pools' which are worth a visit for some fun. Or if you're on Mull, have a dip in the short but beautiful one there.



# Pharaoh's Canyon – Upper

<b>Star rating</b>	****
<b>Grade</b>	4 B/C
<b>River</b>	Allt Airdeasaid
<b>Duration</b>	45mins approach – 2hrs descent – return via Lower Section
<b>Canyon length</b>	500m
<b>Longest abseil</b>	27m
<b>Parking</b>	NH 051 896 (57.8536, -5.2858)
<b>In</b>	NH 048 888 (57.8465, -5.2908)
<b>Out</b>	NH 051 893 (57.8502, -5.2865)

## Canyon description

One magnificent canyon, tucked away in the North of Scotland. Made up of sandstone, it has a brilliant grippy nature – unlike all the others! It breaks down into two parts, the upper being the deep canyon full of large waterfalls and the lower part known as the 'Pharaoh's Playground'. Go find out why.

## Getting there

Following the same directions as for Dundonnell Canyon (Route 3), keep driving past Dundonnell Canyon towards Dundonnell village. Continue on the A832 for another 2.5 miles to the hamlet of Ardesie. A bridge over the bottom of the canyon gives you a view of the final waterfall. Park in a large layby on the left by a green pump house.

## Approach

Walk back towards the canyon and follow a path up, on river-right. You will be able to view the lower section as you walk up next to it and sometimes on the side of it. Keep following the path up the hill as it gets steeper and the river





1

disappears from sight. When you reach a bunch of boulders at the top of the path, start to make your way down to the river and get in where it's easiest to access.

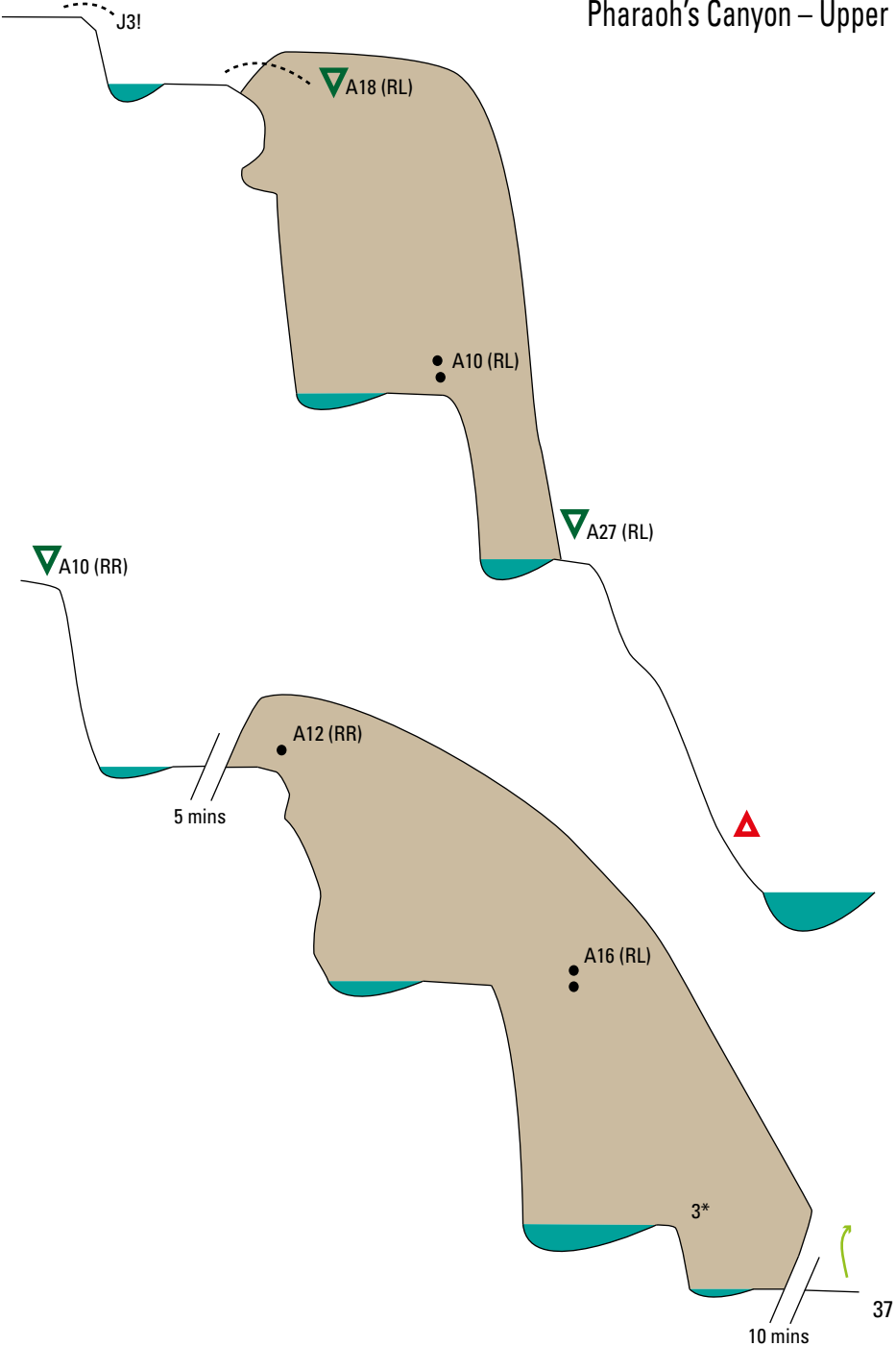
## Descent

Make your way down a downclimb / shallow jump and towards the first big waterfall. Carefully climb out to the left to find a chockstone anchor to rig for the starting abseil. Another shorter abseil then leads you to the next big pitch. At the top of this next waterfall there are signs of rockfall, take care here. This 27m pitch can be rather aquatic towards the bottom as the water crashes overhead, a thrilling experience. Grippy gorge-walking and a couple of abseils lead you down through this beautiful gorge until you reach the final two waterfalls in the upper section. The first is another mildly aquatic abseil from the right, the next has anchors around to the left just over a ledge. All that remains is some beautiful gorge-walking out the upper section onto an open plateau where the 'playground' begins.

## Water level marker

You can view the last rappel of the lower section from the road bridge. It will go in higher water levels as most abseils can be done out the flow, but a few will give you a kicking. The waterfall by the road will look quite substantial but that is a good medium level. If it's solid white, then it's very high.

# Pharaoh's Canyon – Upper





# Pharaoh's Canyon – Lower

<b>Star rating</b>	***
<b>Grade</b>	4 B
<b>River</b>	Allt Airdeasaidh
<b>Duration</b>	30mins approach – 1hr 30mins descent – 5mins return
<b>Canyon length</b>	450m
<b>Longest abseil</b>	20m
<b>Parking</b>	NH 051 896 (57.8536, -5.2858)
<b>In</b>	NH 051 893 (57.8502, -5.2865)
<b>Out</b>	NH 054 896 (57.8533, -5.2812)

## Canyon description

The 'Pharaoh's Playground', as it is also known, is the open plateau, lower section of the canyon where you can explore multiple routes down the river. The start falls down into a side gorge before opening out to glorious views over Little Loch Broom.

## Getting there

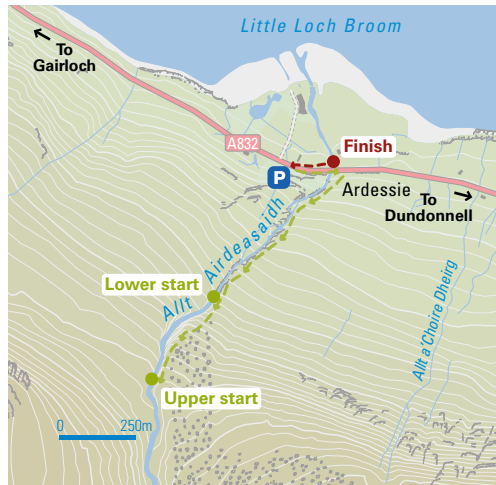
See directions under Pharaoh's Canyon – Upper.

## Approach

Follow the same route up for the Upper section of the canyon but stop on a large plateau of sandstone where the river emerges from a steep-sided gorge. You should see a big blue pipe in the river which directs some flow to the pump house.

## Descent

On this large plateau you will see the water flow





Side gorge – The Adventure Photographers

2

drops back down into a side-gorge, an awkward abseil gives you access into it but this gorge can be avoided by walking down river-right if you so choose. There are a few features to overcome in here, finishing with a small abseil at the end. After this short gorge section, the open area is yours to pick and choose your way down; there are some fun features to be found. The large falls in the middle of this, offers a large but technical jump (technical because of a tight landing area), be careful and inspect first. You'll also find a boulder suspended over a gorge which has been jumped from but there is an underwater ledge and it is a bit shallow!

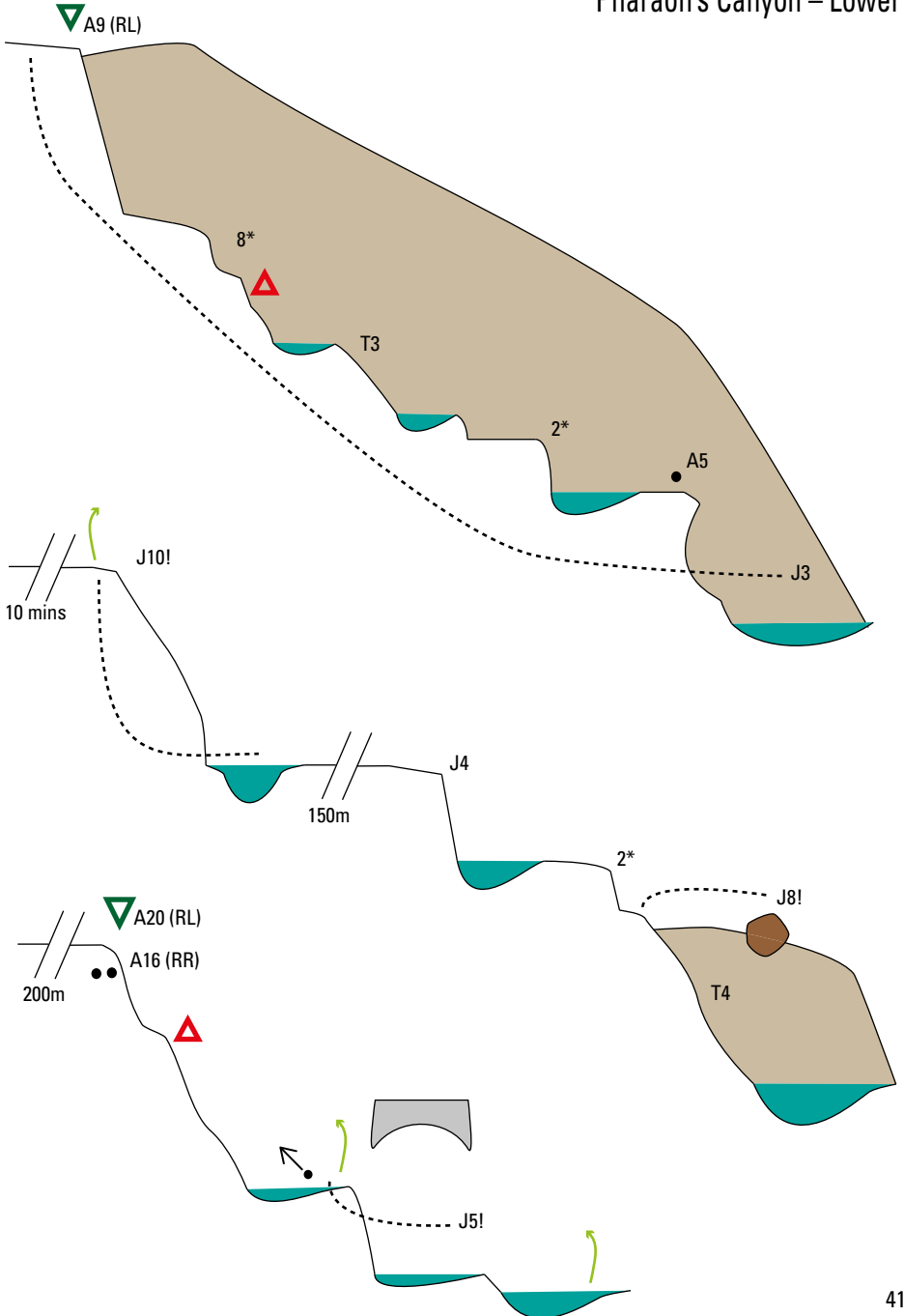
When you reach the final waterfall by the road, you have two options for an abseil. Either take the aquatic option from a tree anchor river-left or a dry abseil from bolts at a lower point river-right. You can now exit here onto the bridge or take the climb under the road bridge first. Walk back along the road to the car.

### Water level marker

See details under Pharaoh's Canyon – Upper.



# Pharaoh's Canyon – Lower





## Topographic Legend

A12 (RR / RL / RC)

J5

T7

9\*

!

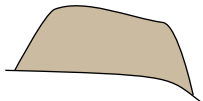
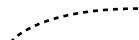


H/L

RBL



10 mins / 100m



Abseil 12 metres (River Right / River Left / River Centre)

Jump 5 metres (Always check first!)

Toboggan 7 metres

Unprotected drop 9m (Possible downclimb or build abseil)

Technical / Caution (May be difficult or dangerous)

Bolt / Piton (Two dot = double anchor)

Natural Anchor (Tree, Boulder, Cairn, etc.)

Handline

Re-Belay

Guided Rappel Anchor

In-situ Handline

Easy Exit Left / Right

Hard Exit Left / Right (May involve basic climbing)

Gorge-Walk / Swim (For 10 mins / 100m)

Hazard (Strong currents, Siphons, Sharp-edges, etc.)

Hydraulic Water (Recirculating water, Stoppers, Whirlpools, etc.)

Bypass Route

Tributary River (Entering from the Left / Right)

Footbridge / Road Bridge

Boulder / Debris

Encased Section (May be inescapable)



Other titles of interest to canyoneers:



**White Water Safety & Rescue**

How to stay safe, and failing that, get out of trouble in white water ...

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**Outdoor First Aid**

How to give first aid and manage casualties in the great outdoors ...

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## Danny Watts

Originally from Kent, Danny Watts moved to Scotland where he soon discovered his love for the sport of canyoning. Now with over 8 years of canyoning experience, in Scotland and abroad, Danny has become a top guide and a respected canyoning teacher, bringing the skills and experience needed to shape the next generation of canyoneers in the UK.

Over the last 5 years, Danny has put his time into exploring both the popular and the unseen canyons, leading a number of first descents into previously un-explored gorges and deep canyons of Scotland. All of this work has accumulated into this book, created with a little bit of hard work, plenty of travel, a lot of wetsuits and a whole heap of passion for the sport.



## SCOTTISH CANYONS

### The guide to the canyons and gorge walks of Scotland.

This guidebook has been created for both experienced canyoneers and for those who have just started to delve into this adventurous sport. Here you will find information about some of the best canyons and gorges Scotland has to offer. There are 47 Scottish routes to explore, ranging from beautiful entry-level gorge-walks to committing and challenging canyon descents.

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📷 Front cover: Grey Mare's Tail – The Adventure Photographers

📷 Back cover: Chia-aig Falls

📷 Rear flap: Danny Watts – Photo: Michelle Anderson

ISBN: 9781906095796



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