

CICERONE

WALKING THE CAPE WRATH TRAIL

Backpacking through the Scottish
Highlands: Fort William to Cape Wrath



Iain Harper

WALKING THE CAPE WRATH TRAIL

WALKING THE CAPE WRATH TRAIL

**BACKPACKING THROUGH THE SCOTTISH
HIGHLANDS: FORT WILLIAM TO CAPE WRATH**

by Iain Harper

CICERONE

JUNIPER HOUSE, MURLEY MOSS,
OXENHOLME ROAD, KENDAL, CUMBRIA LA9 7RL
www.cicerone.co.uk

© Iain Harper 2022
Fourth edition 2022
ISBN: 978 1 78631 134 4
Third edition 2021
Second edition 2015
First edition 2013



A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.
Printed in China on responsibly sourced paper on behalf of Latitude Press Ltd
All photographs and illustrations are by the author unless otherwise stated.



© Crown copyright 2022. OS PU100012932

For Angela, Tony, Kay and Innes

Updates to this Guide

While every effort is made by our authors to ensure the accuracy of guidebooks as they go to print, changes can occur during the lifetime of an edition. Any updates that we know of for this guide will be on the Cicerone website (www.cicerone.co.uk/1134/updates), so please check before planning your trip. We also advise that you check information about such things as transport, accommodation and shops locally. Even rights of way can be altered over time. We are always grateful for information about any discrepancies between a guidebook and the facts on the ground, sent by email to updates@cicerone.co.uk or by post to Cicerone, Juniper House, Murley Moss, Oxenholme Road, Kendal LA9 7RL, United Kingdom.

Register your book: To sign up to receive free updates, special offers and GPX files where available, register your book at www.cicerone.co.uk.

Additionally this guide works in tandem with a new website, www.capewrathtrailguide.org, where regular route news and updates will be posted. The site also allows you to share your own expedition reports, photos and videos for others to read as well as a comprehensive directory of accommodation and useful links.

Front cover: Looking towards the cape, Sandwood Bay (Stage 14)

CONTENTS

Preface	11
INTRODUCTION	15
Geology and wildlife	17
Getting there	18
Getting around	19
When to go	20
Accommodation	21
Safety	23
Emergencies	27
Money and communications	28
Preparation and planning	28
What to take	29
Waymarking and access	31
Maps and navigation	32
Using this guide	33
1 FORT WILLIAM TO STRATHCARRON	35
Stage 1 Fort William to Glenfinnan	37
Stage 2 Glenfinnan to Glen Dessarry	44
Stage 3 Glen Dessarry to Barisdale	49
Stage 4 Barisdale to Morvich (near Shiel Bridge)	56
Alternative Stage 1 Fort William to Laggan	64
Alternative Stage 2 Laggan to Cluanie	70
Alternative Stage 3 Cluanie to Morvich (near Shiel Bridge)	77
Stage 5 Morvich (near Shiel Bridge) to Strathcarron	82
2 STRATHCARRON TO INVERLAEL (NEAR ULLAPOOL)	91
Stage 6 Strathcarron to Kinlochewe	93
Alternative Stage 6 Bendronaig to Kinlochewe	100
Stage 7 Kinlochewe to Strath na Sealga	107
Stage 8 Strath na Sealga to Inverlael (near Ullapool)	113
3 INVERLAEL TO CAPE WRATH	119
Stage 9 Inverlael (near Ullapool) to Oykel Bridge	121
Alternative Stage 9 Ullapool to Oykel Bridge	127
Stage 10 Oykel Bridge to Inchnadamph (or Loch Ailsh)	131
Stage 11 Inchnadamph to Glendhu	138
Alternative Stage 11 Loch Ailsh to Glendhu	142

Stage 12	Glendhu to Rhiconich.	147
Stage 13	Rhiconich to Sandwood Bay	153
Stage 14	Sandwood Bay to Cape Wrath.	158
Appendix A	Route summary table	165
Appendix B	Accommodation.	166
Appendix C	Shops, cafés and Post Offices	168
Appendix D	Useful websites	169
Appendix E	Maps	170
Appendix F	Further reading.	171

Acknowledgements

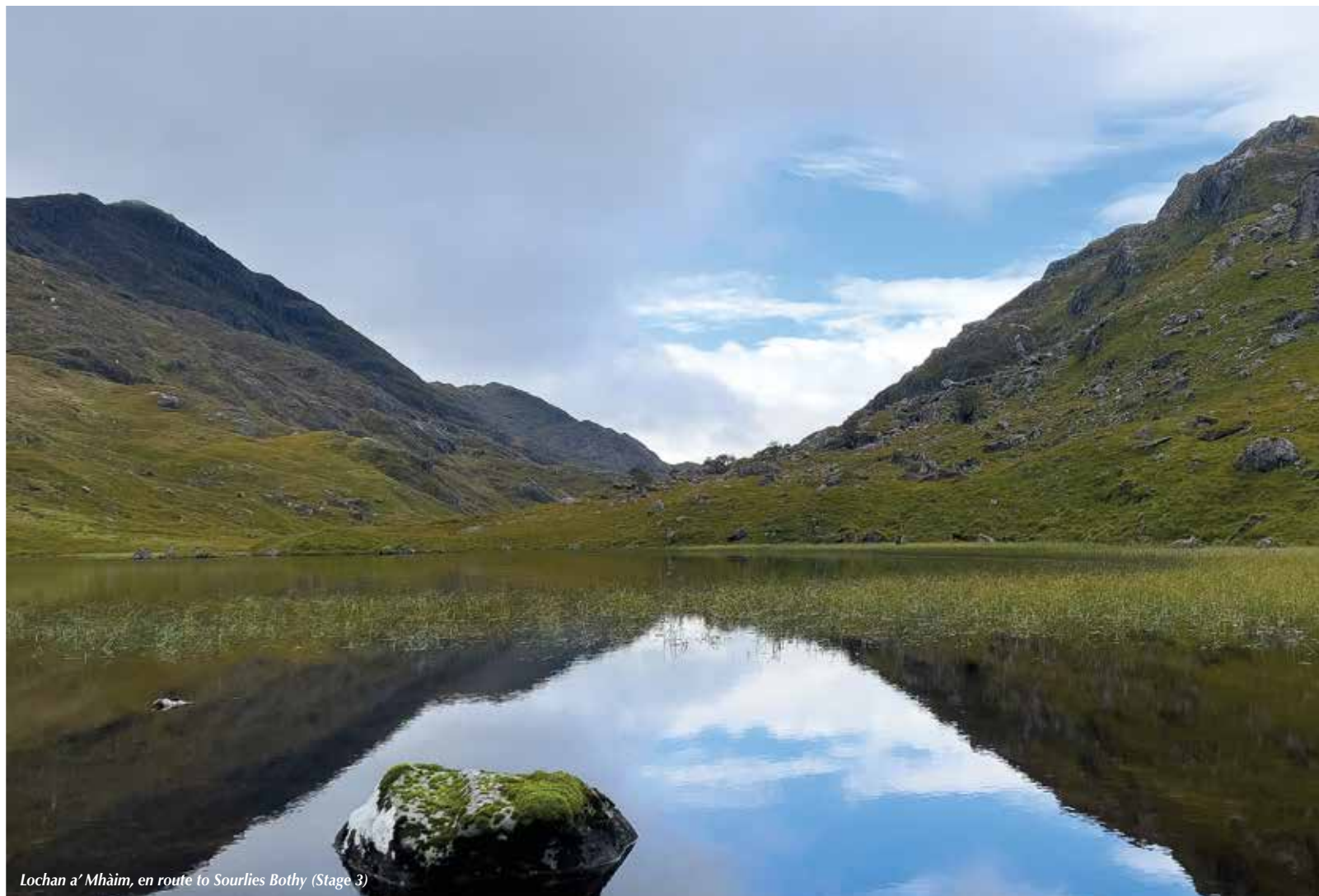
It's hard to believe that this new edition comes 10 years after I first started researching this guide. If you're reading these words, then chances are you're experiencing the same nervous excitement I had, poring over maps, looking at route options and endlessly changing my mind about what to take. Since this guide was first published, the Cape Wrath Trail has continued its seemingly inexorable rise in stature. But the wildness of the terrain, the choice and variety of routes and the lack of waymarking make an expedition as tough a proposition as ever. Occasionally I hear mild concerns that the trail might become 'too popular'. Having walked it on numerous occasions, I rest easy in the knowledge that the sheer mental and physical toughness required provides a permanent barrier to the route becoming spoilt.

Any book that follows a route primarily suggested by others inevitably owes a large debt of gratitude to those who blazed the trail. In particular, David Paterson, Cameron McNeish, Denis Brook and Phil Hinchcliffe: without their pioneering and inspirational work, this route wouldn't be as popular as it is. I'm very grateful to my beautiful and long-suffering wife, who put up with me being far away from home for so many trips to research this book. I'd also like to thank Bob Smith for his companionship during a memorable mid-winter expedition where we endured some of the coldest conditions in 20 years, arriving at the cape on Christmas Day. Tom Forrest has probably done more than any single individual to promote the trail and has been hugely generous with advice and support during the writing of this book. Thanks also to the many people who have got in touch from all over the world with information fresh from their own journeys along the trail, you are too numerous to mention. Enjoy your adventures. You're in for something special.

Warning

Mountain walking can be a dangerous activity carrying a risk of personal injury or death. It should be undertaken only by those with a full understanding of the risks and with the training and experience to evaluate them. While every care and effort has been taken in the preparation of this guide, the user should be aware that conditions can be highly variable and can change quickly, materially affecting the seriousness of a mountain walk. Therefore, except for any liability which cannot be excluded by law, neither Cicerone nor the author accept liability for damage of any nature (including damage to property, personal injury or death) arising directly or indirectly from the information in this book.

To call out the Mountain Rescue, ring 999 or the international emergency number 112: this will connect you via any available network. Once connected to the emergency operator, ask for the police.



Lochan a' Mhàim, en route to Sourlies Bothy (Stage 3)

Rough bounds of Knoydart (Stage 3)



PREFACE



Sandwood Bay (Stage 13)

After gazing at the sky for some time, I came to the conclusion that such beauty had been reserved for remote and dangerous places, and that nature has good reasons for demanding special sacrifices from those who dare to contemplate it.

Richard E Byrd, Alone (1938)

From the headland that juts imperiously over the broad ochre strand of Sandwood Bay, you may catch a first glimpse of the Cape Wrath lighthouse peeking over the low, dun hills of the horizon, beckoning you the final few miles towards the end of one of the world's finest long-distance walks. You'll already have crossed most of the northwest coast of Scotland via

Morar, Knoydart, Torridon, Assynt and Sutherland, winding through some of its most remote and beautiful glens. Cape Wrath itself, staring out into the white-capped North Atlantic, closer to the Faroe Islands than to England, is now within a day's walk.

The Cape Wrath Trail is not an officially recognised UK National Trail. In truth, it is not really a trail at



Descending into Gleann Cuirnean (Stage 2)

all, more a jigsaw of routes between Fort William and the most northwesterly point of mainland Britain, to be assembled according to your preferences. Perhaps because of this unique flexibility and lack of formal status, it has become highly regarded by many backpackers. It's a tough test for anyone and you'll brave remote country, rugged terrain, rain, wind, midges, bog and tricky river crossings. Most people take between two and three weeks to complete the full journey and whatever time of year you attempt the trail it will test the limits of your physical and mental endurance. But dark, boggy moments are quickly forgotten amid a solitude and beauty rarely found in modern life.

This trail has an intriguing capacity to draw people into some of the most wild and remote places Scotland has to offer. The cape itself, so aptly named, pulls you inexorably northwards – there can be few other long-distance paths with such an inspiring finale. There is also something in the challenge of traversing such a vast, primal and largely unspoilt tract of land that explains why this route has attracted so many fans. Its beauty lies in its freedom: you'll find few signposts around here. This one's for true connoisseurs of the wild lands, and it's down to you.

This book draws together updates and attempts to improve on a variety of routes that have previously been suggested. It also offers a wide range of variations, recognising that

there can be no definitive path suitable for all. It shares the same intrinsic aims as those that have gone before, namely to visit the most scenic areas and avoid most tarmac roads and high level mountain traverses. This brings the route well within the abilities of most ambitious but experienced hill walkers.

The trail traditionally begins in Fort William and winds across Ardgour towards Glenfinnan, taking in the gloriously remote rough bounds of Knoydart before striking north to Shiel Bridge, Strathcarron, Kinlochewe and Inverlael, near Ullapool.

A popular alternative route leaves Fort William via the Great Glen Way before turning north to cut across Glen Garry and Glen Shiel, rejoining the main route at Morvich, near Shiel Bridge. North of the Ullapool road, the route turns inland to Oykel Bridge before heading towards Glencoul via Inchnadamph and the majestic Ben More. Then, below the shadows of Arkle and Foinaven, the final stretch passes Rhiconich and on to the farthest northwest coast and over the moors to Sandwood Bay and the Cape Wrath lighthouse, the end of the journey.

Follow as much or as little of the route as you like. Take detours, plan alternatives, make the journey to the cape your own. It's one that will live with you for the rest of your life.

Iain Harper



Path by Carnach River, Sgurr na Ciche in the background (Stage 3)

INTRODUCTION

The Cape Wrath Trail is part of a vast network of 720 long-distance paths that criss-cross the British Isles. Some of these are official National Trails – well-maintained long-distance footpaths and bridleways administered by Natural England and the Countryside Council for Wales and waymarked with acorn symbols. In Scotland, the equivalent trails are called Long Distance Routes and are administered by Scottish Natural Heritage. There are currently 15 such routes in England and Wales and four in Scotland. Many other long-distance paths are equally well maintained and waymarked.

The Cape Wrath Trail is fairly unique, combining a complete lack of waymarking and a variety of routes rather than a firmly fixed trail. The route often follows traditional drovers' and funeral routes, dating back hundreds of years, which provided the only means for crofters to move themselves and their animals around the rugged landscape of the Scottish Highlands.

The route as we currently know it has evolved more recently, with landscape photographer David Paterson's 1996 book *The Cape Wrath Trail: A 200 mile walk through the North-West Scottish Highlands*



View back to Glenfinnan (Stage 2)

Climbing towards the Forcan Ridge (Stage 4)

setting out a basic template. Paterson set off from Fort William with his camera and a bivvy bag and his route was initially along the Great Glen Way, hence its inclusion in this book as a route alternative. The route starting along the Great Glen Way was further popularised by Cameron McNeish, wilderness backpacker and editor at large of *The Great Outdoors* magazine, who suggested a more practical and less circuitous alternative to Paterson. McNeish has included this version of the route in his Scottish National Trail, which spans the entire country. He neatly summarises the trail: 'It's the sort of long distance route that most keen walkers dream of. A long tough trek through some of the most majestic,

remote and stunningly beautiful landscape you could dare imagine. The Cape Wrath Trail is a challenging and often remote route which, in essence, could be described as the hardest long distance backpacking route in the UK.'

A later book, *North to the Cape* by Denis Brook and Phil Hinchcliffe, cemented the trail's burgeoning popularity, and first suggested starting the trail through Knoydart rather than the Great Glen, a route that has now become firmly established as the more popular choice with walkers.

Because of its difficulty and the relative lack of amenities, the Cape Wrath Trail has resolutely defied the commercialisation that has come to other long-distance backpacking

trails in the Highlands like the West Highland Way.

More recently, the trail has become part of the International Appalachian Trail (IAT), a backpacking trail running from the northern end of the Appalachian Trail in Maine, USA through New Brunswick, to the Gaspé Peninsula of Quebec, Canada after which it extends to Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, Newfoundland and Labrador. Geological evidence shows that the Appalachian Mountains and the mountains of Western Europe and North Africa are parts of the former Central Pangean Mountains, made when minor supercontinents collided to form the supercontinent Pangaea more than 250 million years ago. With the break-up

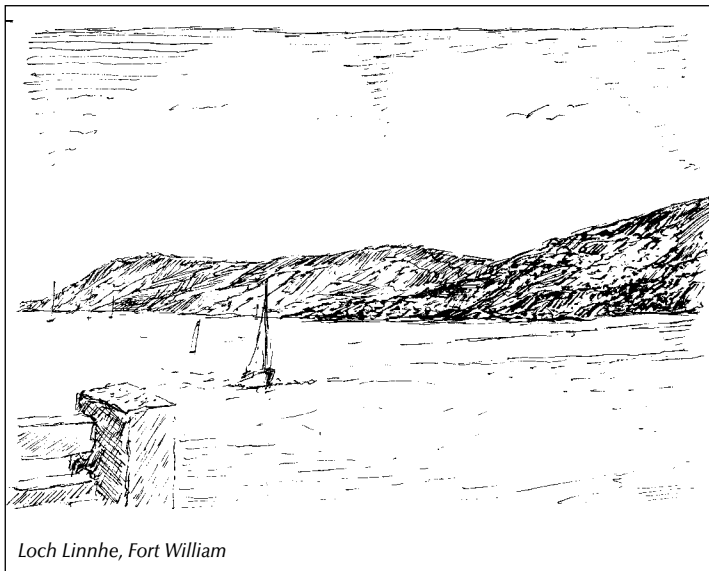
of Pangaea, sections of the former range remained with the continents as they drifted to their present locations. Inspired by this evidence, efforts are being made to further extend the IAT into Western Europe and North Africa.

GEOLOGY AND WILDLIFE

This book is a walking guide not a natural history guide, but suffice to say that if you're a fan of rocks and creatures, you're in for a real treat. Assynt in particular has been described as an 'internationally acclaimed geological showpiece' and you're as likely to bump into a geologist as a stag wandering through its glens. You'll also be spoilt for choice with fauna, from the golden eagles of Knoydart, ptarmigan,

Descending to Loch an Nid (Stage 7)

1 FORT WILLIAM TO STRATHCARRON



Loch Linnhe, Fort William

The Cape Wrath Trail is not a route that eases you in gently. You'll quickly find yourself deep in some of the remotest and roughest areas of Scotland. The terrain and the time it can take to cover relatively short distances often catches people out, so take this first section steadily. The stage to Glenfinnan is fairly forgiving, but as you leave Glen Dessarry it's pretty unrelenting all the way to Strathcarron. For all its difficulty, this is arguably the most stunning section of the trail. Each stage has its own unique challenges and rewards, from the rugged beauty of Knoydart to the showy spectacle of the Falls of Glomach. By the time you reach Strathcarron your feet will be sore but you'll already have plenty of stories to tell.

STAGE 1

Fort William to Glenfinnan

Start	Fort William
Finish	Glenfinnan Monument
Distance	34.3km (21¼ miles)
Ascent	610m
Average duration	1–2 days
Terrain	Mostly easy walking along road, 4x4 tracks and clear paths
Maps	OS Landranger 41 (Ben Nevis); 40 (Mallaig & Glenfinnan); OS Explorer 391 (Ardgour & Strontian)
Amenities	Hotels, bunkhouse (Glenfinnan); Corryhully bothy (NM 912 844)
Camping	Good riverside camping spots in Cona Glen and Glenfinnan

The start of any great adventure needs a sense of theatre and the ferry from Fort William to Camusnagaul provides it. As you head towards the hills of the Ardgour peninsula and alight at the pier at Camusnagaul you've already made a firm step away from civilisation. Despite being so close to Fort William, the Ardgour peninsula feels immediately remote and cut off, and you can't help but feel slightly nervous as you strike off on the first steps of this epic journey. Counterintuitively you start your journey to the most northwesterly point of Scotland by heading almost due south.

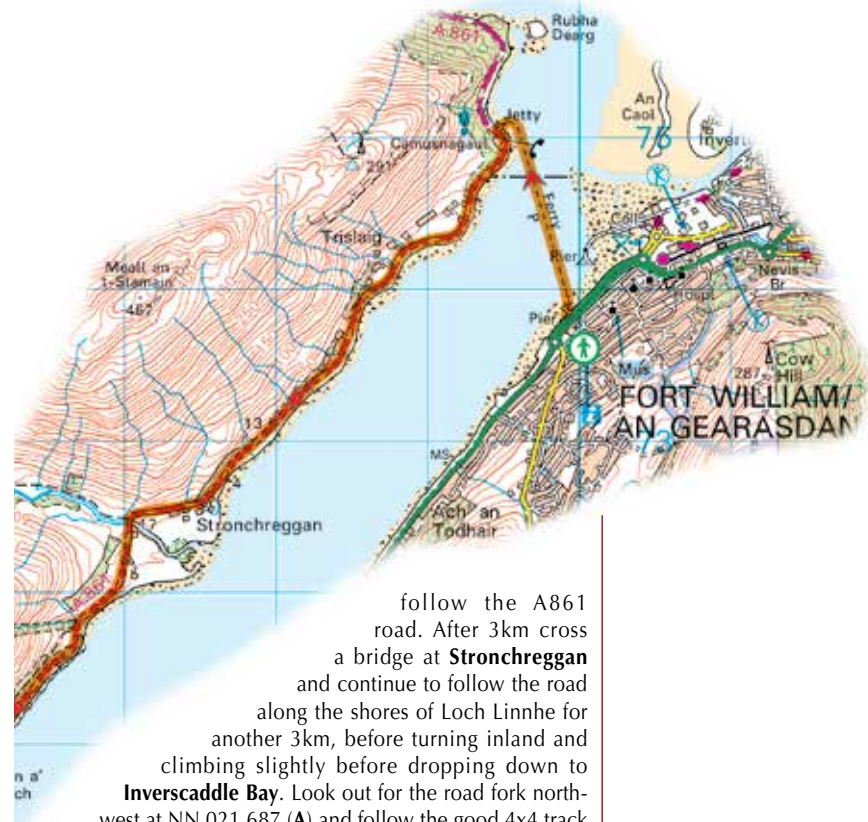
The main route follows the road south along the shores of Loch Linnhe before turning inland up Cona Glen. At just over 20 miles, this is a long first day if tackled in one go, so you may choose to ease yourself into the walk and camp short of Glenfinnan. There is an estate bothy in the glen that is generally locked but there are good camping spots by the river. From Cona Glen the path turns north and climbs over the shoulder of Meall na Cuartaige before descending to the Glenfinnan Monument that guards the northern end of the serpentine Loch Shiel.



Looking across Loch Linnhe from Fort William

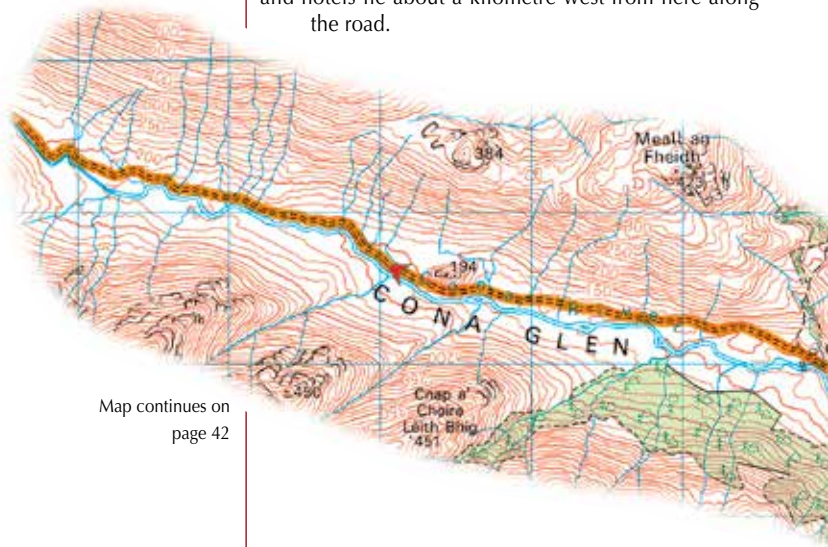
Every couple of hours from Monday to Saturday the rusty boat slips out from Fort William's **pier** onto the dark waters of Loch Linnhe, leaving behind the cars bustling along the lochside road. On alighting at the pier at **Camusnagaul**, turn south and

Map continues on page 41



follow the A861 road. After 3km cross a bridge at **Stronchreggan** and continue to follow the road along the shores of Loch Linnhe for another 3km, before turning inland and climbing slightly before dropping down to **Inverscaddle Bay**. Look out for the road fork north-west at NN 021 687 (A) and follow the good 4x4 track on the north side of the Cona River up the glen past **Corrlarach** bothy. Continue on this track for 6km to NM 905 738, where it becomes less distinct and climbs right, away from the river, to a junction below **Meall nan Damh** at NM 897 746 (B). Climbing slowly north-east over the shoulder of **Meall na Cuartaige** brings you to a long and gentle descent past forestry to the bridge over the River Callop at NM 924 792 (C). Don't cross this bridge, instead turn west and follow the clear track heading northwest through woodland until you reach a footbridge that takes you across the river and towards the **Glenfinnan Monument**. Glenfinnan's railway station

and hotels lie about a kilometre west from here along the road.



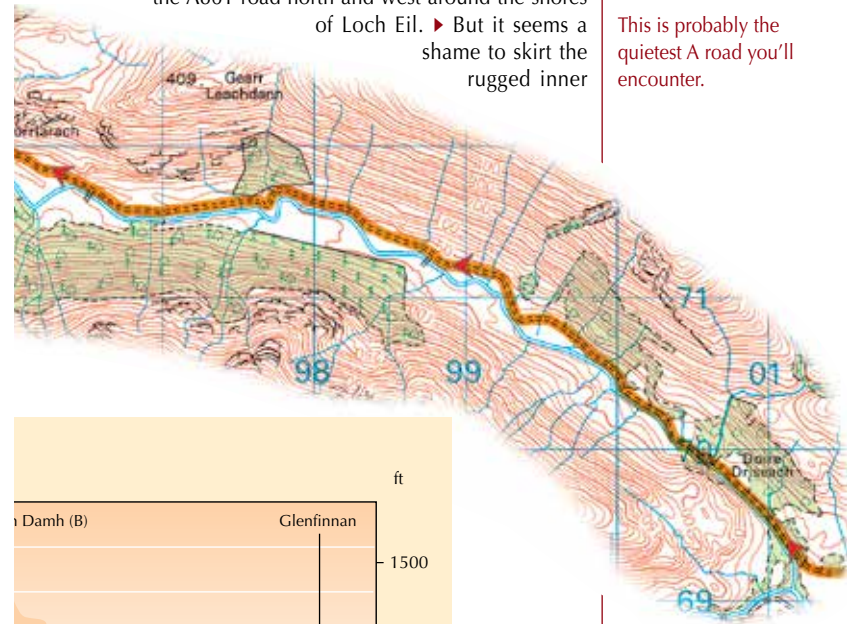
Map continues on page 42

Glenfinnan itself has a couple of smart hotels and a bunk-house at the train station. Further up the glen is a well-kept estate bothy at Corryhully. Even further up the glen good camping spots abound by the River Finnan, giving you a head start on the next day's journey.

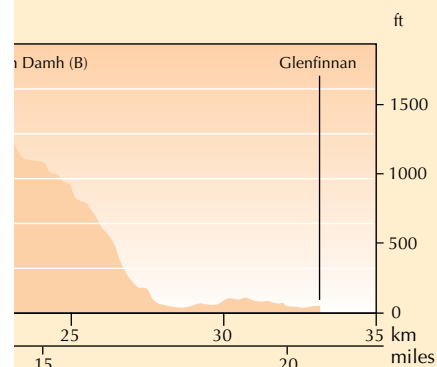
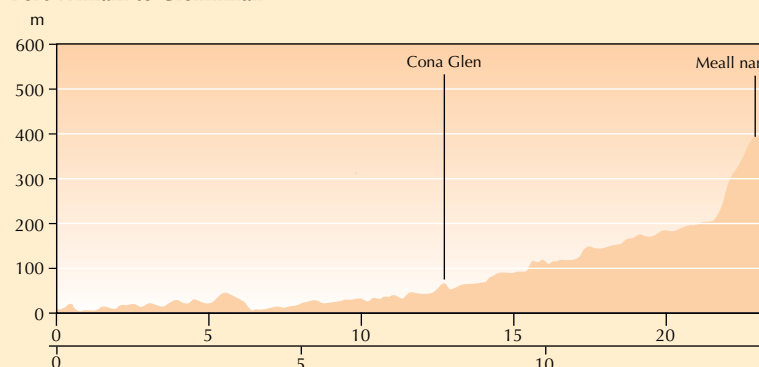
Route alternatives

From Camusnagaul you could choose instead to follow the A861 road north and west around the shores of Loch Eil. ▶ But it seems a shame to skirt the rugged inner

This is probably the quietest A road you'll encounter.



Fort William to Glenfinnan



beauty of the peninsula and it brings you out some way from the amenities at Glenfinnan.

A major alternative start to the Cape Wrath Trail has been suggested by Cameron McNeish that initially follows the Great Glen Way. It's a slightly easier start to the walk and gives access to more easterly country than the main route, which may appeal to some. From Fort William you follow the Great Glen Way along Loch Lochy and pass by Invergarry into the beautiful Glen Garry, before traversing the spectacular Glen Loyne to Cluanie. The route then heads north towards the hostel at Alltbeithe. From here you have a couple of choices to rejoin the main route. You could head west along Fionngleann and Gleann Lichd to Morvich, rejoining this guide's main route at Stage 5, or take the spectacularly wild route northwest along Gleann Gnìomhaidh, turning north along Gleann Gaorsaic to Carnach. Either is superb – this is wonderful country. ►

This route is described in Alternative Stages 1 to 3



Following the River Finnan into Glenfinnan



- a 230-mile (370km) route
- passes through wild and magnificent landscapes of the western highlands
- Morar, Knoydart, Torridon and Assynt

The Cape Wrath Trail is a 230-mile epic from Fort William to the northwestern-most point of mainland Scotland, with scope on the three-week journey to choose preferred routes and distances. The trail passes through Knoydart, Torridon and Assynt, to the peaks of Foinaven, Arkle and Ben More.

Regarded as the most challenging of Britain's long-distance routes, it combines a complete lack of waymarking with a variety of route options exploring the most majestic, remote and stunningly beautiful landscapes of the Scottish Highlands. The trail uses ancient drover paths, follows forested glens and crosses bogs, high moorland and mountain passes.

The Cape Wrath Trail offers an unparalleled level of freedom and adventure for experienced trekkers.



- a remote three-week trek, for ambitious and tested backpackers
- best walked in April, May and June, or September and October
- 14 main stages described, with 6 alternative options

CICERONE

www.cicerone.co.uk

WALKING | SCOTLAND

