

Planning and preparation

Best time of year

The Cowal peninsula seldom sees extremes of weather and the Cowal Way could in theory be walked at any time of year. However, its latitude (56° North) means that daylight varies from about 18 hours in late June to about six hours in late December. Winter (November to February) is not recommended unless you have a compelling reason. Winter walking must be timed carefully to fit the daylight available, the ground is likely to be sodden and streams are more likely to be in spate.

April, May and June are ideal months, while rhododendrons and wildflowers are at their best, with banks of primroses and bluebells on the lower ground. September and October sometimes offer settled weather, when hills are purple with heather and foliage shows its glorious autumn colours. Cowalfest, the annual outdoor festival, takes place in October, see www.cowalfest.org.

July and August are the traditional holiday months, bringing tourists to Cowal and making accommodation scarce. Finding a bed is notoriously difficult during the famous Cowal Highland Gathering at the end of August: see page 62. This is also the height of the season for midges (small but maddening insects that bite).

The climate is generally mild and moist. Cowal winters tend to be wet rather than very cold, but rain and wind can be expected at any time of year. On high ground especially, the combination of wind and wet makes for severe wind chill, so preparation and suitable clothing are essential. Before setting out, check the local weather forecast: see page 62. The weather can change very fast, so always be ready to change your plans.



Stepping stones beside Loch Riddon

Terrain and gradients

The Way includes every type of terrain from tidal beach to open moorland. The route links existing rights of way and public footpaths by means of forest tracks and some quiet public roads with a tarmac (sealed) surface.

Elsewhere, the forest roads have loose surfaces, mainly gravel. On public footpaths and certain rights of way, the going is more challenging. Expect some boggy bits unless the weather has been dry for some time. In the upland parts, the route is sometimes narrow, indistinct and steep. Although the difficult parts tend to be short, they reduce your overall speed to a surprising extent.

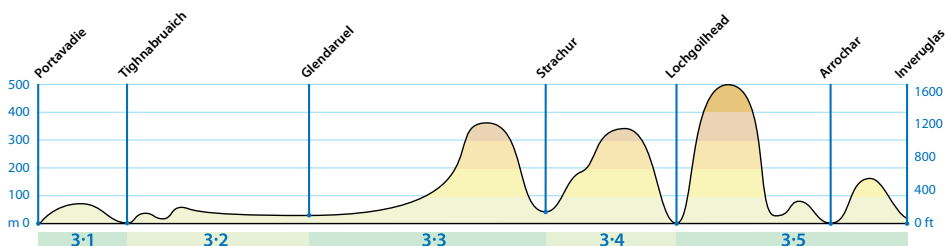
The south-west section of the Way is mostly easygoing with gentle gradients and very little altitude gain. Only the Loch Riddon stretch needs some agility for the rocky path above the beach among the rhododendrons. Timing your walk for low tide avoids some of the difficulties: see page 35.

Although its highest point is at a modest 500 m (1640 ft) near the cairn shown on page 49, don't underestimate the Cowal Way. It offers enormous variety, but at the price of some slow going, especially in the wet. Remember that rough terrain reduces your average speed, and that a group travels at the pace of its slowest member. Overall, you are unlikely to average more than 3 or 4 km/hr (2-2½ mph) unless you are seriously pushing yourselves.



Stony path climbing above Lochgoilhead

The profile below shows the contrast between the first two low-lying sections and the other three. They rise successively to 360, 350 and 500 m (1180, 1150 and 1640 ft) and only the last section can readily be split (by overnighting at Arrochar).



Previous experience

The Cowal Way is not the ideal choice for your very first long-distance walk, although in fair conditions any healthy person could complete it within five days. But it's never advisable to do your first long hike alone, so seek the company of a more experienced walker. In the sections north of Strachur, if cloud or mist descends, one of you may need to be competent in the use of map and compass: see page 49.



Whatever your experience, before leaving for Cowal, do several all-day walks, if possible on consecutive days, to test your footwear and to build up fitness. If you will be carrying your belongings for the whole trip, practise hiking with a laden rucksack. Don't under-estimate the longer sections, particularly in energy-sapping, windy or wet conditions. If walking alone or in adverse conditions, always leave a note of your expected arrival time and place. Read page 52 if you intend to climb the Cobbler. For advice on choosing and buying gear, obtain our *Notes for Novices*: see page 63.



The Loch Sloy private road

Days, stages and duration

This guidebook follows the recommended direction, from south-west to north-east. This allows for a gentle start on low-lying terrain, as well as for travel time to Portavadie, which has no accommodation. Walking in this direction, the higher, more challenging sections come later, when you are well into your stride.

The final stage from Lochgoilhead to Inveruglas makes a long haul, leading to a late finish at a place with no accommodation. It can readily be broken by an overnight at Arrochar, which has a range of B&Bs and one campsite (Glen Loin), with another nearby at Ardgartan. You could seize the opportunity to climb the famous Cobbler next day (see page 52), and then complete the walk to Inveruglas. Or, if you're out of time, you can return to Glasgow quickly by walking to Arrochar & Tarbet station (see page 53) or by catching a bus.

The Way begins at Portavadie, where the ferry arrives from Tarbert (Loch Fyne), the northern terminus of the Kintyre Way. It finishes at Inveruglas, where in summer the Inversnaid Hotel ferries people across Loch Lomond to the West Highland Way: see page 62. For ambitious walkers, therefore, the Cowal Way makes a potential link between the southern tip of Kintyre and Fort William at the northern end of the West Highland Way, or even all the way to Inverness via the Great Glen Way.

Table 1 presents the Way in five sections, with distances and overnight stops as in the detailed description on pages 30 to 55. Many people will follow this linear sequence. Unless you are supported by vehicles with drivers, or can co-ordinate host or public transport carefully, you may be carrying a heavy load, or at least your overnight things, spare clothing and a packed lunch. One company already offers a Cowal Way package including baggage transfer, and others are sure to follow: see page 62.

However, the sections can be completed in any order, tackled as day walks or split over a couple of long weekends. If splitting it into day walks, don't underestimate the driving times to start and finish. Although distances are modest, average speeds can be low, especially on single-track roads where you need to wait in passing places (marked by white diamonds) to pass oncoming traffic and to permit overtaking. In Cowal, all unclassified roads, most B roads and even some A roads are single-track for miles on end.

Table 1 Distances and overnight stops (five-day walk)

	<i>miles</i>	<i>km</i>
Portavadie	6	10
Tighnabruaich	11	18
Glendaruel (Caravan & Camping Park)	16	26
Strachur	9	14
Lochgoilhead	15	24
Inveruglas		
Total	57	92

