

Foreword

The Great Glen Way runs for just over 77 miles (125 km) from Fort William to Inverness. It starts beside Britain's highest mountain, Ben Nevis; follows its greatest geological fault along the shores of its most famous loch, Loch Ness; and finishes at Inverness, its most northerly city and the capital of the Highlands. Much of it goes alongside the Caledonian Canal, Thomas Telford's far-sighted feat of Victorian engineering that opened in 1822.

Most of the route is straightforward, with flat sections along canal towpaths and a disused railway trackbed, and undulating parts on forest tracks and minor roads. However, there are some demanding gradients and terrain, and the final section is a challenging 20 miles (32 km) long: see page 7.

Since its royal opening in 2002, the route has evolved into a number of Great Glen Ways for people to enjoy by various means. Although at first there was a Great Glen Cycle Route that diverged from the walking route, the distinction was abandoned in 2006, since when the whole route officially could be biked or hiked. Most people walk the route in five to seven days or cycle it in two to four days. Others enjoy it on horseback or paddle it in a canoe: the Great Glen Canoe Trail opened in 2012 and attracts thousands of paddlers each year.

In summer 2014, through a £1 million project, the Forestry Commission Scotland created over ten miles (16 km) of waymarked Great Glen 'High Route' above Loch Ness. These new options take you above the tree line and offer much better views than the traditional route, with some challenging gradients and a new summit at 422 m (1385 ft) on Creag Dhearg. We believe that this option has made the Way even greater than before.

Loch Ness from the summit of the High Route



1 Planning and preparation

The Great Glen Way is a very appealing route, one that any healthy person of any age can tackle and realistically expect to complete. It is slightly easier than the West Highland Way, for example, being shorter overall, less strenuous and mainly on better terrain. Consistent waymarking and generally modest gradients also make this route a good choice for your first long-distance route.

Planning and preparation are important. Well in advance, complete a few long hikes or bike rides, depending how you intend to travel. Progressively build up the distance that you complete, and try to go out on consecutive days. While training, carry a realistic load on your bike or in your rucksack. Inexperienced walkers can obtain our *Notes for novices*: see page 70. Cyclists should observe the SNH leaflet *Off-road cycling: good practice advice*. The download is free (see page 69) and helpful cycling websites are listed on page 70.

Ideally, use the same bike for training as you intend to ride on the route: this should be either a mountain bike or a robust hybrid, not a road bike. Although much of the route is fairly flat, beyond Fort Augustus it contains some stretches with stiff hill climbs. In terms of UK mountain bike trail grading, most of the southern half would be graded green or blue, but north of Fort Augustus there are significant sections of red. If coming from a distance, you may prefer to hire a bike in the Great Glen. Some bike shops offer a pickup service in conjunction with your hire, which simplifies returning the bike.

No-one should undertake the Great Glen Way casually, because the weather in Scotland is so unpredictable. On any given day in the Highlands, you may experience weather typical of any season, and perhaps all four. This adds variety to the experience, but also makes it important to be prepared for anything and to have suitable clothing.

This book has been planned in the recommended direction, going north-east from Fort William to Inverness. The prevailing wind in Scotland is south-westerly, so you are more likely to have the wind at your back. The longest section is your approach to Inverness, by which time you'll be well into your stride. Finally, on average there should be less rain as you move north-east: Inverness has annual rainfall of 25 inches (635 mm), compared with Fort William's 80 (2030 mm). This may be good for morale.



How long will it take?

Most walkers will spread the route over five to seven days, whereas most cyclists will complete it in two to four days. How long you need depends not only on your fitness and attitude, but also on your time available and the pace you find comfortable. Don't underestimate the time you need: allow yourself leisure to enjoy the fine scenery and wildlife viewing opportunities. Read section 2.4 to decide whether you want to build in time for any hill side-trips. These could add anything from half a day to a couple of overnights to the overall duration. Table 1a shows distances and suggested sections for walkers, and Table 1b for cyclists.

Table 1a Six-day itinerary for walkers

		<i>miles</i>	<i>km</i>
3-2	Fort William to Gairloch	10-7	17-2
3-3	Gairloch to Laggan Locks	12-7	20-4
3-4*	Laggan Locks to Fort Augustus	10-6	17-1
3-5*	Fort Augustus to Invermoriston	8-9	14-3
3-6	Invermoriston to Drumnadrochit	14-5	23-3
3-7**	Drumnadrochit to Inverness	20-0	32-2
	Total	77-4	124.6

*For a 5-day itinerary, combine sections 3-4 and 3-5.

** For options for splitting section 3-7, see page 7.

Table 1b Three-day itinerary for cyclists

3-2 - 3-4	Fort William to Invergarry	29	47
3-4 - 3-6	Invergarry to Drumnadrochit	30	48
3-7	Drumnadrochit to Inverness	20	32
	Total	79	127

For a 4-day itinerary, split the middle section.
For a 2-day ride, break the route at Fort Augustus or Invermoriston.

Plan how you will reach the start and return from the finish. Depending on distance, you may need to overnight in Fort William and/or Inverness. Table 2 on page 13 gives estimated times by various forms of travel to help you plan. Depending on distance, you could perhaps walk or ride the Way in sections, for example over a few week-ends, making use of the regular bus services along the A82.

Part 3 describes the Way in six sections, and Table 1a shows distances for each of these. Fast and fit walkers may prefer to combine two sections for a five-day itinerary, and others in less of a hurry may spread it over seven days. Table 1b shows how cyclists may wish to complete the route over three days, with options for two or four days.

Route options include the Invergarry Link route from Laggan Locks to Aberchalder on the western shore of Loch Oich. This adds about 2 miles/3 km to the overall distance but it opens up more choice of accommodation: see page 10. It is fully waymarked and shown in alternative route style on our dropdown map.

Two new sections above Loch Ness, known as the High Route, were opened in 2014. These create exciting options for walkers to enjoy much better views. The gradients are a bit more challenging and will slightly increase the time you need: see pages 52-3 and 57-8. These new sections are not recommended for cyclists because they contain some very steep bits, and a few obstacles such as stone cross-drains which would involve dismounting. In terms of UK mountain bike trail grading, they would be graded mainly red with some black parts. The High Route options are waymarked and shown on our dropdown map and in altitude profiles.



High Route terrain: unsuitable for cyclists

Note that the last section is very long – 20 miles (32 km) – and many, perhaps most, walkers will find that too long for a single day. Dearth of accommodation makes it difficult to split unless you are willing and able to camp at Abriachan. Here are two options to consider:

- Spend two nights at Drumnadrochit (Drum), and walk as far as Blackfold on the first day (12 miles/19 km); some tour operators and B&B hosts will organise a vehicle pickup from Blackfold back to Drum, returning you to Blackfold next morning to complete the route.
- Take a boat-based approach to walking or cycling the whole route, which allows the distance to be split over six full days and two half days, hosted by Caledonian Discovery: see pages 23 and 69.

Read also the sections about the best time of year (page 10) and accommodation (pages 10-11) before deciding when to go and how long to spend.

*Fingal approaching
Kytra Lock*

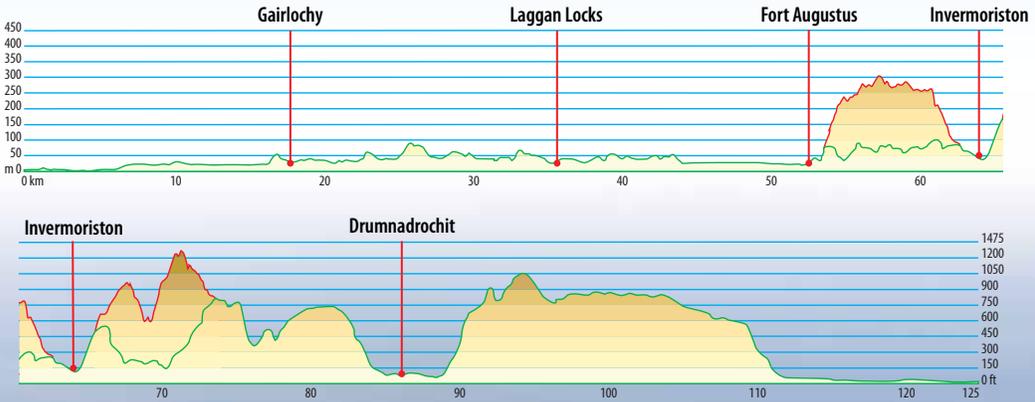


Terrain and gradients

The Way passes over a variety of surfaces, mostly firm ones such as canal towpath and railway trackbed, forest tracks and minor roads. In places, however, the going can be rocky, boggy and challenging. Both sections of the new High Route climb high above the traditional route, the southern one to 316 m (1040 ft) and the northern to a new high point of 422 m (1385 ft). The newly constructed paths are in places steep or very steep, but the surface is sound and the views rewarding.

Many people imagine the Way as running along canal towpath, and they tend to underestimate the amount of climbing and descending involved. To complete the traditional Great Glen Way, you gain over 1400 m (4600 ft) of altitude even though you never go higher than 382 m (1250 ft) above sea level. If you use both sections of the new High Route, that figure increases considerably.

The altitude profile below shows the overall trend, which is that the gradients become more challenging in the later sections – assuming that you start from Fort William as we recommend. There is a more detailed altitude profile at the head of each section in Part 3: these are worth close study if you are in doubt about whether to split a section, or about how long it will take you to complete.



Navigation and waymarking

The route, including the optional sections of Invergarry Link and High Route, is fully waymarked with the 'thistle in a hexagon' logo which appears on pale blue posts and fingerposts and on information boards. Consistent waymarking and generally modest gradients make this route a good choice for your first long-distance route.

The photographs on this page will help recognition, but it's easy to miss a waymarker if you are distracted. Refer to our dropdown map often, and if you haven't seen a waymarker for 30-40 minutes consider the possibility that you are off-route. It's often better to backtrack to the last waymarker than to carry on regardless. If you plan to venture off the Way, especially into the mountains, be sure to carry also the largest scale map you can obtain. Follow the Mountain Code: see page 27.

