

Foreword to the fifth edition

The West Highland Way is a great introduction not only to the Highlands of Scotland, but also to long-distance walking. In 1998 it was my own first long walk, an expedition that led via Mount Kilimanjaro to the foundation of Rucksack Readers and the publication of our first guidebook in 2000. Since then, I've completed the Way many times, with frequent return visits to the parts near home. Walking out of season, I have had a genuine wilderness experience.

This is Scotland's first long-distance route and it celebrates its 40th birthday in 2020. Still its most famous and popular walk, it has enduring international appeal. *National Geographic* magazine included it in its 20 'World's best hikes'. Over the 96 miles (154 km) from Glasgow to Fort William, you travel from the rounded Lowland contours of the Campsies and Loch Lomondside through rugged Glen Falloch and Strath Fillan, over the wildness of Rannoch Moor into the mountain grandeur of Glencoe, with the Mamores and Nevis ranges beyond. En route, you'll pass standing stones, ruined chapels and historic graveyards. Walking softly, you'll see wild goat, deer and red squirrel, and a wealth of bird life, from wren to buzzard.

Ultimately, each experience of the Way is unique – different weather, different stops, different company. Many people return to this walk repeatedly, some making it an annual holiday. Others pursue more ambitious, less travelled combinations: you could branch off at Drymen on the Rob Roy Way to Pitlochry, continue from Fort William to Inverness on the Great Glen Way, or follow high-level alternative routes described elsewhere.

However you approach it, memories of your West Highland Way will linger for a long time.

Islands of Loch Lomond, with Ben Lomond to the right



1 Planning to walk the Way

The Way begins in Milngavie near Glasgow, Scotland's largest city, then passes through its first National Park along the shores of its largest loch. Loch Lomond forms a water-bridge spanning the Lowlands and Highlands, with unique geology and wildlife. After 96 miles of superb scenery, the Way ends in Fort William, at the foot of Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain.

Some of the walking is straightforward, along tracks, drovers' paths and old military roads. Some of it can be very rough or boggy underfoot. Other parts can be very exposed and must be taken seriously. If you are not experienced in long-distance walking, read page 9 and take your time. In advance of tackling the Way, most people will benefit from several long day walks, to test their feet, their gear and their fitness.

No such walk should be undertaken casually, because 6-8 days consecutive days of walking puts a strain on those who are unaccustomed to it. Also, the weather in Scotland is unpredictable. On any given day, you may experience weather typical of any season, and perhaps of all four. This adds charm and variety to the experience, but also makes it important to have the right equipment: see pages 14-15.

This book has been planned in the recommended direction – from south to north. The gentle lowland gradients will help you to get into your stride before the more exposed and challenging northerly sections. Also, the prevailing wind is south-westerly, so you are more likely to have it behind you and the grandeur of the Way's approach to Ben Nevis makes a more fitting finale to your walk than Glasgow's suburb of Milngavie.



How long will it take?

Most people spread the walk over 7 to 8 days, depending on the time available and what pace they find comfortable. Remember that the total distance (95½ miles/ 154 km) excludes the extra miles walked to and from accommodation. Table 1 shows distances along the Way and suggests ways of dividing up the mileage.

In Part 3 we divide the Way in sections shown in column 7A. This is a popular breakdown, despite the very long day from Tyndrum to Kingshouse (19 miles/30 km). Turn it into an 8-day option by overnighiting at Inveroran.

Columns 7B and 7C show two other ways of arranging it within 7 days, with 7C for those who wish to split it into two expeditions, using Crianlarich as halfway point. We suggest the unequal split (with an extra day for the northern section) because of the terrain and availability of accommodation.

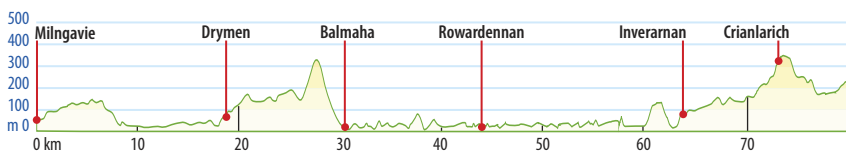
Column 6 shows a demanding 6-day schedule, with two very long days, needing a fast pace and long hours of daylight. Very experienced, fit walkers may want to squeeze the Way into 4 or 5 days, whilst endurance runners run it non-stop. The record for the annual West Highland Way race (held in June) stands at the astonishing time of 13 hours 41 minutes, run in 2017 by Rob Sinclair. Since you are unlikely to compete with that, focus on the quality of your own experience. It really doesn't matter if somebody else takes a day more or less.

Plan within your comfort zone and allow time to savour Scotland's finest scenery and wildlife. For many walkers, an extra day is a blessing that transforms their experience from endurance to enjoyment. Take special care to avoid overdoing it early on: some walkers suffer so badly from blisters that they abandon the route.

You can reach the start and return from the finish by public transport, though some groups rely on cars. Table 2 on page 8 gives approximate times for bus, train and car travel. If you need to shorten the walk to fit the time available, you could use public transport, e.g. a bus to Drymen (from Glasgow via Balloch), or (in season only) a water bus to Balmaha or Rowardennan (from Luss) or to Inversnaid (from Tarbet).

Table 1: the Way can be split over 6 or 7 days

	6		7 A		7 B		7 C	
	mi	km	mi	km	mi	km	mi	km
Milngavie	12-1	19-4	12-1	19-4	12-1	19-4	12-1	19-4
Drymen	14-3	23-0	14-3	23-0	14-3	23-0	14-3	23-0
Rowardennan			14-0	22-5	14-0	22-5		
Inverarnan	19-9	32-0					19-9	32-0
Crianlarich		12-0	19-3					
Tyndrum	15-4	24-8			18-8	30-3		
Bridge of Orchy			18-9	30-5			12-9	20-8
Inveroran					12-2	19-6	12-2	19-6
Kingshouse	18-6	29-9						
			8-9	14-3	8-9	14-3	8-9	14-3
Kinlochleven								
	15-4	24-8	15-4	24-8	15-4	24-8	15-4	24-8
Fort William								

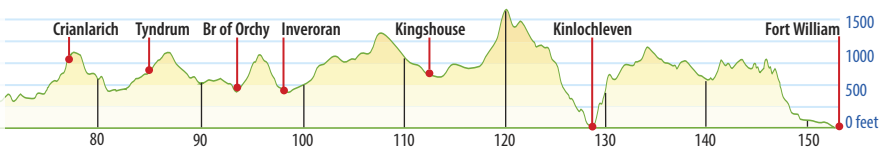




Terrain and gradients

The photos above indicate the range of terrain that the Way passes over. There is very little road walking (just a few short stretches on public road) but a lot of walking on stony paths and tracks, including some former military roads. Unless you are walking during or after heavy rain, there won't be too many boggy bits, but do expect to cross many streams, often by stepping stones rather than footbridges. And there is plenty of rough ground, thick with tree roots and boulders, especially along the eastern shore of Loch Lomond.

The altitude profile below shows how the gradients north of Loch Lomond are steeper than those in the southern half of the Way. Also, fewer options for accommodation make for less flexibility about splitting the distances (unless you are camping throughout). Although low-lying, many walkers find the section along Loch Lomondside north from Inversnaid surprisingly tiring. The overall ascent for the whole route is about 4270 m (14,000 ft).



Planning your travel

To plan your travel, consult the maps together with this table, which shows the shortest scheduled times for bus and train (as of 2019). Car journey times are based on driving within speed

Table 2: Distances and shortest journey times between selected places

	<i>miles</i>	<i>km</i>	<i>by bus</i>	<i>by train</i>	<i>by car</i>
Glasgow – Fort William	100	160	3h	3h 45m	2h 30m
Glasgow – Crianlarich	52	84	1h 45m	1h 50m	1h 20m
Crianlarich – Fort William	52	83	1h 30m	1h 45m	1h 10m
Edinburgh – Fort William	145	232	4h 15m	4h 50m	3h 30m
Edinburgh – Glasgow	45	72	1h 05m	46m	1h
London – Glasgow	405	652	8h 30m	4h 30m	7h

limits with minimal fuel stops, making no allowance for traffic holdups: all figures are rough guidelines only. Check timetables carefully in advance: not all services are daily, and in winter services tend to be less frequent. Contact details for transport providers are given on page 79.

If you arrive in Scotland by plane, hiring a car at the airport might seem attractive. However, you would have to find somewhere reasonably safe to leave the car for a week, and allow time to return to it from the other end of the walk. It may be cheaper and simpler to use public transport and taxis.

You could consider leaving a car at Crianlarich and using the train or bus to reach the start (and return from the finish) of the Way. This would allow you to exchange some clothing and other supplies halfway. You could arrange to park it at the B&B or hotel where you are staying, at your own risk.

If you have a non-walking driver in your group, he or she could arrange to rendezvous with hikers. Our mapping shows where main roads meet the Way, and also the railway stations. Scottish Citylink operates buses from Glasgow up the A82 that stop at Luss, Arrochar, Ardlui, Crianlarich, Tyndrum, Bridge of Orchy, Glencoe and Fort William. Stagecoach operates an hourly bus service between Fort William and Kinlochleven via Ballachulish.

Weather and best time of year

Fortunately for those who have little choice over their holiday dates, any season apart from winter can be fine. Be prepared for cold, wet and windy weather at any time, and you may be pleasantly surprised. Below are some factors to ponder:

- Winter is less suitable, because the days are so much shorter: at this latitude, expect only 6-7 hours of daylight in late December. Exposed parts of the Way may be prone to snow and ice.
- Many side-trips are open only in season, typically from April to September/October.
- In winter, public transport has restricted timetables and baggage transfer services do not operate, so you will need to carry your own load.
- In summer, hikers may suffer from pests such as midges (tiny biting insects) and clegs (blood-sucking horse-flies).
- In summer, there will be many more visitors around and there's heavy pressure on accommodation. However, many campsites and B&Bs close for the winter.

If you are free to choose, the ideal months are probably May/June and September/early October. Six day motorbike trials are held annually centred on Fort William and starting on the first Monday in May: www.ssdt.org. This places extra pressure on accommodation at the northern end of the Way.

Walking, cycling and other activities

For anyone interested in serious hill-climbing or mountaineering, there is enormous scope, mainly from Rowardennan northwards. Famous mountains include Ben Lomond (the most southerly Munro), Buachaille Etive Mor (arguably its most shapely: see photo below) and Ben Nevis (Britain's highest: see page 76). Please take mountain safety seriously: see page 25.

Although access rights extend to cyclists and horse riders, the Way was designed for walkers and parts of it are unsuitable for other users. Where the Way is narrow and steep, attempting to cycle it would be irresponsible. Observe the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (see page 11) which says:

On narrow routes, cycling may cause problems for other people, such as walkers and horse riders. If this occurs, dismount and walk until the path becomes suitable again. Do not endanger walkers and horse riders: give other users advance warning of your presence and give way to them on a narrow path.

Experience and daily distances

With sensible preparation, a healthy person of any age can complete the Way. You don't need much expensive gear, but suitable and well-tested walking boots are essential. For advice on gear (including boots, rucksack, gaiters, poles, water carrier and blister treatment) obtain our *Notes for novices*: see page 79. Do some all-day walks on rough terrain before you go. If you're new to walking, it's safer to go along with somebody, and take extra care in winter.

Novices tend to underestimate the time needed. Walking steadily on the flat, you may average about 2½ miles per hour (4 km/hr) overall. If you are climbing, or the terrain is rough, expect 2 mph (3 km/hr) or even less. (These figures allow for brief pauses to admire the view or take a photo, but exclude stops, e.g. for rests or meals.) On this basis, a 15-mile day may take over 7 hours of walking, and a tough 20-mile day at least 8-10 hours plus rest stops. The longer the day, the more likely you are to need stops.

Blackrock Cottage, with the Buachaille behind

