

Introduction

This book describes two strikingly different routes in north-east Scotland: the Dava Way (DW), an inland route from Grantown-on-Spey to Forres, and the Moray Coast Trail (MCT) from Forres to Cullen. The DW crosses a relatively high plateau and makes use of an old railway trackbed, whereas the MCT never rises above 50 m and is rarely out of sight of the coast.

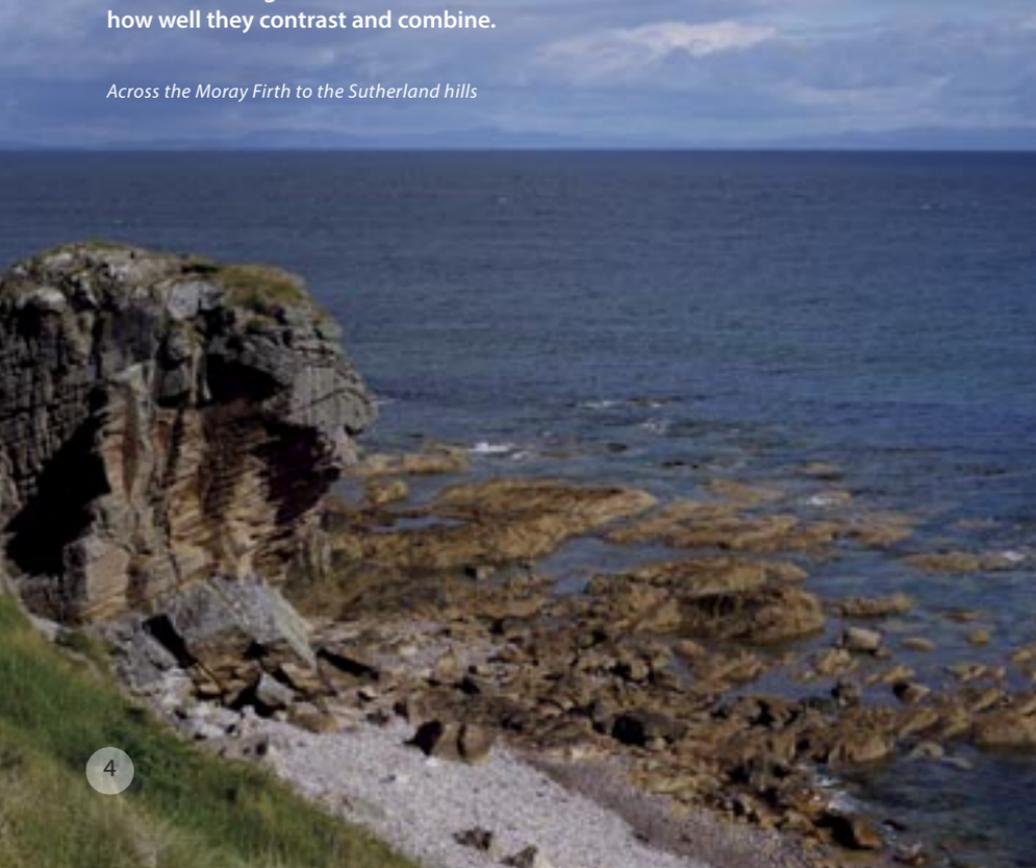
The MCT consists of 44 miles/71 km of beach walking, coastal paths, quiet roads and old railways. Its views are across coves, beaches and skerries to the vastness of the Moray Firth and the North Sea. The DW extends for 23 miles/38 km inland with vistas of mountain, moorland and farmland.

We also introduce the Moray Way, a concept combining the DW with most of the MCT and part of the Speyside Way to form a circular walk of considerable beauty, striking contrasts and historical interest: see pages 68-9.

The DW highlights include panoramic views of the Cairngorm mountains from Dava Moor, the spectacular Divie Viaduct and the wonderful prospect of the Moray Firth and distant Sutherland hills. The MCT is endowed with long, wide beaches and small, secluded coves, with dramatic cliffs and skerries, and the famous Bow Fiddle Rock that graces our front cover.

Dava Moor and the Moray coast are largely undiscovered by walkers in Scotland. This guidebook aims to make them better known and to show how well they contrast and combine.

Across the Moray Firth to the Sutherland hills



1 Planning and preparation

The Dava Way (DW) is an inland route through remote countryside with no villages or refreshment stops and a high point of 321 m (1053 ft). The Moray Coast Trail is completely different: it stays on or very close to the coast, doesn't venture above 50 m (165 ft) and passes through several small towns and villages where public transport and other facilities are available.

The DW follows an old railway trackbed for almost its entire length, with just a few diversions around impassable sections and private dwellings. At each end the Way makes use of roadside footpaths and (near Grantown-on-Spey) a short stretch of quiet country road. Public transport serves the end points where there's ample accommodation. There are a few road access points along the way, but the only scheduled public transport is the school bus from Forres to Edinkillie.

The MCT combines many different surfaces, from quiet country roads to sandy beaches, as well as coastal and forest paths and tracks, roadside footpaths, old railway trackbeds and paths across rocky shores.

The DW is actually 23.4 miles (37.7 km) long, although distances on its trail signs show a rounded total. The MCT is 44.3 miles (71 km) long, although you will see its length quoted variously as anywhere from 41 to 50 miles.

Combining the two makes for a week of splendid, varied walking ranging over some 68 miles (109 km).

Which direction?

The DW is described here northward from Grantown, to link with the MCT running eastward from Forres. Walking the DW from south to north involves less ascent overall, with Grantown at an altitude of over 200 m and Forres lying almost at sea level.

We then describe the MCT eastward: the approach to Cullen makes a grand coastal finale, whereas walking westward you would finish at Forres, having left the coast behind at Findhorn.



How long will it take?

With an early start and suitable transport arrangements, the DW can be walked in a single outing. For an energetic walker, it makes a satisfying, very long day. However, if the distance is too daunting, rest assured that you can break the walk into sections using the access points: see page 26. These show where a few small cars can be parked, especially the Dunphail Breathing Place. Dunphail also has the advantage of a nearby stop (Edinkillie) on the local school bus service.

You can make use of local taxi companies, though this would mean committing yourself to a pick-up time and/or depending on mobile phone reception. For contact details, see page 70 or www.davaway.org.uk.

The MCT is more flexible with plenty of road access, although it has limited accommodation: see table 3 on page 10. Bus services link the coastal towns and villages along the route with Forres and Elgin, and local taxis could help to overcome this problem.

Our MCT route description is divided into four sections, with two longish days. The Findhorn-Lossiemouth stretch (16.1 miles/25.9 km) can easily be broken in Burghead for a five-day itinerary. The other long day, 16.0 miles (25.7 km) from Lossiemouth to Buckie, can be split at Spey Bay, although there was only one B&B there at the time of writing. Splitting both would make for a leisurely six-day walk with very modest daily distances.

Although to walkers with more stamina and fitness, three days might seem to suffice, that means covering a daunting 19 miles/31 km between Burghead and Spey Bay, assuming there is room at its only B&B. With transport to Fochabers (5 miles/8 km away) you could increase your choices, but at a price in flexibility, as well as money: the 334 bus runs on weekdays only, taxis are by arrangement.

The Moray Way combines the whole of the DW with two-thirds of the MCT and about half of the Speyside Way to form a circuit of 96 miles (155 km). The Speyside Way is an official long distance route that generally follows the course of the River Spey between Newtonmore and its estuary at Spey Bay, a site of great scientific importance. Completing the Moray Way is an ambitious undertaking that could take six to ten days, longer with optional extensions: see pages 68-9 for more information.

Table 1 MCT overnight stops

	4 day	
	mi	km
Forres	4.6	7.4
Findhorn	16.1	25.9
Lossiemouth	16.0	25.7
Buckie	7.6	12.2
Cullen		
Total	44.3	71.3

East from Lossiemouth to the Bin of Cullen



Altitude, pace and waymarking

Depending on the season and recent weather, short sections of the DW may be boggy, but this is unlikely to affect your pace overall. Along the MCT, the main limiting factor can be the state of the tide and the firmness of the sand underfoot. Another factor influencing your rate of travel will be the number of people in your group. Groups travel at the pace of their slowest member, or slightly less. Overall, expect to average 2 to 2½ mph (3-4 km/hr) unless you're very fit and keen to press on.

The Dava Way has a high standard of waymarking with interpretation boards and 18 numbered waypoints detailed in the *Dava Way Companion*: see page 70. There are fingerposts with the DW logo or arrows wherever necessary, and at all junctions.

The DW is essentially a medium-level route, rising to a high point of 321 m (1052 ft) and remaining above 100 m until the descent to Forres: see page 26 for its profile.



Dava Way Association

The Association was founded by volunteers in 1997 following a Forres household survey in which development of the old Grantown-Forres railway line for cycling and walking was voted top proposal. During the next six years access was negotiated with landowners along the route. Then masses of broom, gorse and trees were cleared, some of the flooded cuttings made passable and a bridge was replaced. The Dava Way was officially opened in September 2005, and is maintained entirely by volunteers. For more information on this outstanding project, visit www.davaway.org.uk.



The MCT waymarking is generally reliable, although in 2021 Portgordon had alternative routes waymarked without comment, and some distances on signs were inaccurate. Starting at the Tolbooth in Forres, the trail passes Sueno's Stone: see page 39. Beyond Findhorn, look for signposts in various styles, generally metal in towns and villages and wooden elsewhere. Some marker posts bear the MCT logo with fulmar, others have coloured bands or lettering. Some marker posts may be hidden by vegetation in summer.

What is the best time of the year?

Snow is likely to cover Dava Moor between November and March and some sections of the DW can be very wet during winter. Short days would make it impossible to complete the route in a single day at walking pace in daylight. All things considered, the ideal time would be between May and September. The MCT can be walked at any time of year. There are long exposed sections without any form of shelter, where cold winds or hot sunshine can make walking uncomfortable. Wildflowers are at their best in late spring and early summer; birds are a source of interest year-round, with some rare species over-wintering here. Accommodation is more limited during winter, and hours of daylight restricted.

Travel planning

To plan your travel, consult Table 2 and the bus routes diagram opposite. Good train and bus services connect the towns of Aviemore, Inverness and Aberdeen with Glasgow and Edinburgh.

Table 2 shows the fastest scheduled times for bus and train journeys in 2021. Car journey times are the fastest likely within speed limits, with no allowance for traffic delays or fuel/meal stops. All figures are guidelines only. Check schedules in advance, as winter timetables may be restricted: see page 70 for contact details.

Table 2 Distances and journey times between selected places

Approx	miles	km	by bus	by train	by car
Edinburgh / Grantown <i>via Aviemore</i>	140	225	4h 25m	–	3h 15m
Edinburgh / Forres	163	262	–	4h	3h 45m
Inverness / Grantown	35	56	1h	–	45m
Inverness / Forres	27	43	1h 10m	30m	40m
Grantown / Forres	23	36	–	–	30m
Cullen / Aberdeen	56	90	2h 30m	–	1h 30m
Cullen / Inverness	60	97	2h 35m	–	1h 30m
Forres / Cullen	33	53	1h 30m	–	45m
Aberdeen / Edinburgh	127	204	3h	2h 30m	2h 30m

Inverness Airport is 10 miles east of the city and in 2020 had international flights from Amsterdam (KLM) and direct flights from London Heathrow (BA). Other airports served include Gatwick and Luton (easyJet) and Belfast and Manchester (Loganair). Aberdeen Airport is at Dyce, 7 miles to the north-west, and had international flights including from Amsterdam (KLM), Dublin (Aer Lingus) and Paris (Air France). Among regional airports served were Belfast, Newcastle, Birmingham and Manchester (all Loganair), Cardiff (Eastern Airways), London Gatwick (BA, easyjet). Check airport websites for updates: see page 70.

Bus services link both airports to their city centres. Dyce station is on the Inverness/Aberdeen mainline and is 2.8 miles (4.5 km) from the airport by taxi.

The diagram below shows the bus services operating along or near the DW and MCT. Services are provided by Stagecoach (except route 312, operated by Kineil Coaches): check for up to date timetable information: see page 70.

