

Introduction

'A beggar's mantle fringed wi' gowd' – the 'gowd' in King James VI of Scotland's description of Fife referred to the value of trade through its coastal ports. Modern walkers may strike gold of another kind when they discover the coastal scenery of Fife.

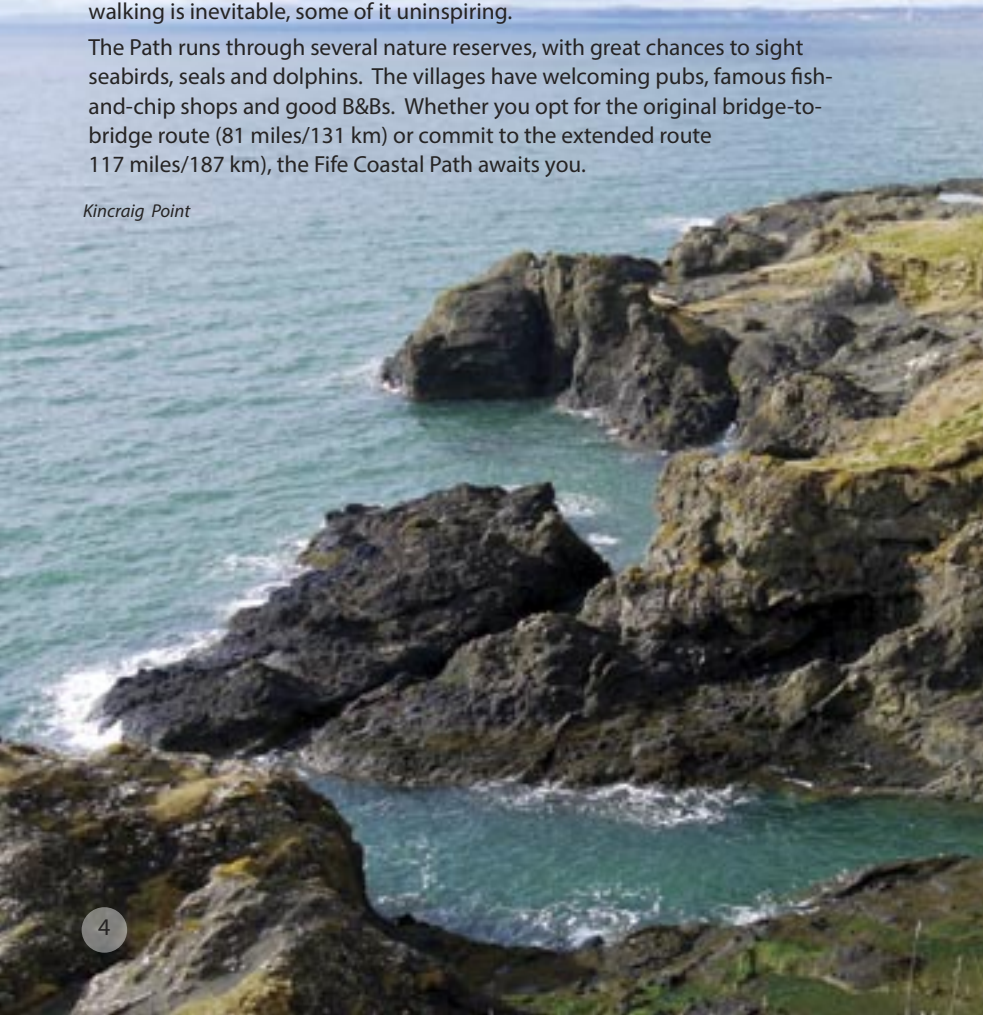
The Kingdom of Fife derives from the Pictish Kingdom of Fib. Defying all changes in governance, the label Kingdom has persisted ever since. Sandwiched between the Firths of Forth and Tay, Fife is more island than peninsula, and many Fifers speak of their Kingdom with full patriotic pride.

Fife's role in Scottish history is attested by churches, castles and caves with ancient carvings. The villages of its East Neuk (corner) have charming white-washed cottages and they host arts festivals. The ancient university town of St Andrews was once Scotland's ecclesiastic capital, and is famous worldwide as the home of golf.

For the walker, this is a route of contrasts. Easy, flat walking through dunes and beside golf courses often leads to slow going on rocky shorelines. Clifftop paths afford wide views, disused railway trackbed is more secluded, in the north there's some forest and the final section is largely farmland. Urban walking is inevitable, some of it uninspiring.

The Path runs through several nature reserves, with great chances to sight seabirds, seals and dolphins. The villages have welcoming pubs, famous fish-and-chip shops and good B&Bs. Whether you opt for the original bridge-to-bridge route (81 miles/131 km) or commit to the extended route 117 miles/187 km), the Fife Coastal Path awaits you.

Kincraig Point



1 Planning

Best time of year and weather

The ideal time to walk the Fife Coastal Path is between May and September. In Scotland, hours of daylight are long in summer, especially during late May to late July. Also, there is a better chance of good weather, and more flexibility within each day, for the 6-10 days that most people will need to complete the route. If you want to visit the Isle of May, boats run only from April to September inclusive: see page 24. Be aware also of various arts festivals held in the East Neuk in July/August: see www.rucsacs.com/links/fcp.

Winter is better avoided, at least if planning to complete the route in a single expedition, because poor weather is more likely and short days are certain. But if you live within striking distance and wish to complete the route in sections, you could set off at short notice, whenever the immediate weather forecast is favourable. It is vital to make best use of the very limited daylight hours on such winter forays.



The weather in Scotland is highly variable. Statistically, the best months are May and September but periods of good or bad weather can occur at any time of year. Conditions can change so quickly that you feel you're experiencing all four seasons in one day. The route is walkable in all weathers: the important thing is to be prepared. Check the weather forecast and tidal data for wherever you plan to walk: see page 78. Always carry appropriate clothing and equipment.

Which direction?

This guidebook is written for walkers heading anti-clockwise around the route. There are two good reasons why we recommended this direction. First, it means that you move from the more urban former mining towns on the Forth, through the charming fishing villages of the East Neuk, onward through historic St Andrews to reach the rural shores of the Firth of Tay beyond Newport. Second, it puts the prevailing wind (south-westerly) at your back for most of the Path, heading into the wind only on the final section – if you choose to include it: see below.

Most people will need to complete their route in a single expedition – unless you happen to live so close to Fife that day walks or weekend forays are feasible. That would allow you to pick and choose the most scenic sections, but we still recommend an anti-clockwise trend.

Which route: original or extended?

The Fife peninsula faces east, shaped like a dog's head: see map opposite. There are bridges at only two points – south across the Forth and north across the Tay. When officially opened in 2003, the Path ran for 81.4 miles/131 km from North Queensferry (at the Forth bridges) to Newport-on-Tay. This original bridge-to-bridge route is still what many or most people mean by the FCP. In 2011/12 the route was officially extended at both ends to encompass the entire Kingdom, adding 35.1 miles/56.5 km to its length and bringing a raft of logistic problems for unsupported walkers.

Most if not all tour operators still operate the original route, sending clients from North Queensferry to Newport, despite their awareness of the extensions and willingness to use vehicle transfers where necessary. Their decision is partly based on the need to tailor total distance and time to suit what most clients can spare. Mainly, however, it is to solve the problems of transport, compounded by lack of accommodation, at each end of the extended route.

In Parts 3-1 and 3-9, we describe the extensions in full detail, so that you can decide for yourself whether they justify the extra time and effort. As of 2021, the nearest accommodation to the official start was 2 miles from Kincardine, and at the Newburgh end only the 3-bedroom Abbey Inn which may not offer evening meals (albeit there are take-away options nearby). With nowhere to stay, walkers from afar may understandably be baffled as to how to reach Kincardine early enough to walk 17 miles (27 km) to North Queensferry. And unless booked into the Abbey Inn, you may find it hard to enjoy the final stretch of 18.3 miles (29.5 km) without anxiety about missing the last bus out of Newburgh.

Getting there and away

Stirling
←

Selected bus and train routes

Check services using contact details on page 79

Bus

Train

Fife Coastal Path

Not to scale



Access to Fife is much easier for the original bridge-to-bridge route than for the extended route. North Queensferry, near Edinburgh, can be reached by rail or bus (Citylink or Megabus) from Glasgow, Edinburgh or Perth: see page 79. If ending your walk at Newport, you can cross the road bridge and take a bus or train from Dundee. Indeed, many people overnight in Dundee for a much wider choice of accommodation.

Another option, caused by market forces in St Andrews B&Bs (see page 9), is to spend two nights there, walking to Newport on the second day and taking a local bus (Moffat & Williamson 92B) back to St Andrews for the second night. This makes for a long last day, but simplifies the return journey home – by bus from St Andrews or by train from Leuchars.

To reach the official start at Kincardine means taking a bus, perhaps from Glasgow or Dunfermline or from Halbeath Park & Ride. To return from Newburgh, the only option is a bus. Stagecoach's route 36 runs between Glenrothes and Perth via Newburgh. As of 2021, the last bus south to Glenrothes left at 19.49 (17.44 on Sundays). Northbound, the last bus to Perth left Newburgh at 18.45 (16.17 on Sundays). Perth has plenty of accommodation and good train and bus services, so will suit most people better than Glenrothes. However, if you miss the last bus, you face an expensive taxi ride to avoid being benighted in Newburgh. Contact details for public transport are on page 79. Timetables vary by the day and season: check carefully in advance.

How long will it take?

How many days you need to complete the entire route varies from person to person, and depends also on the size of your group and the distance you have to travel. Our route description is divided into nine sections, each of which can be completed in a single day by a fit hiker. However, if you are tackling the route in sections and need to allow some travel time, or if you prefer shorter distances, you may need to split some. Know your own strengths and weaknesses, and plan accordingly.

As explained above, omitting either the first and/or the final section of the official route may be preferable or necessary – especially if you have a long journey. Table 1a shows sample itineraries based on the sections in this book, with both extensions included (16.8 miles/27 km and 18.3 miles/29.5 km): if you are following the bridge-to-bridge route you can simply ignore them for a 7-day itinerary, or reduce it to 6 days by skipping Leuchars. Table 1b shows different options for overnight stops, including Kingsbarns which is slightly offroute, so the overall distance is fractionally greater, but the longest section is only 16.3 miles (26.2 km). Although you can save a day by skipping St Andrews, this would be a shame unless you already know the town. You can pick and mix from either list: obviously there isn't space to list all the permutations. Read also pages 24 and 46-7 to decide whether you need extra overnights to visit the Isle of May or to complete the Elie Chainwalk at a safe state of the tide.

Table 1a 9-day itinerary based on guidebook sections

	miles	km
Kincardine	16.8	27.0
North Queensferry	11.8	19.0
Burttisland	16.5	26.6
Leven	9.6	15.4
Elie	11.0	17.7
Crail	13.3	21.4
St Andrews	6.6	10.6
Leuchars	12.6	20.3
Newport	18.3	29.5
Newburgh		
Total	116.5	187.5

1b 10-day itinerary based on alternative overnights

	miles	km
Kincardine	11.5	18.5
Limekilns	13.6	21.9
Aberdour	12.0	19.3
Dysart	10.5	16.9
Lundin Links	10.9	17.5
Anstruther	13.8	22.2
Kingsbarns*	8.4	13.5
St Andrews	6.6	10.6
Leuchars	15.0	24.1
Wormit	16.3	26.2
Newburgh		
Total	117.7	189.2

* As of 2021, no evening meals were available

Accommodation and refreshments

You are seldom very far from a café, pub or shop, although your options become sparser beyond St Andrews. In the final stretch beyond Wormit there are no facilities until you reach Newburgh, where there are pub meals at weekends only. We show most options in the table below, focusing on places where in 2015 there was accommodation. Further refreshment options are shown on the map pages in Part 3.

With the sole exception of a basic dormitory hostel in St Andrews, Fife has no low-cost accommodation near the route, so unless you wish to camp (see page 10) you have to pay the price for B&Bs or hotels. Accommodation was available (pre-pandemic) at all the overnight stops suggested in the tables on page 8. Larger places offer a selection, particularly towns such as Inverkeithing, Kirkcaldy, Leven and St Andrews. However, during golfing events and university graduation, most places in eastern Fife are fully booked months in advance; and many B&Bs in St Andrews impose a two-night minimum stay year-round. Smaller villages have very limited options, sometimes only a single B&B, which may be fully booked long in advance.

	miles from last place	km from last place	B&B/ hotel	campsite	pub	café	food shop/ carryout
Kincardine					✓	✓	✓
Culross	4.1	6.6	✓		✓	✓	✓
Limekilns	7.4	11.9	✓		✓	✓	✓
Rosyth	2.0	3.2	✓		✓	✓	✓
N Queensferry	3.3	5.3	✓		✓	✓	✓
Inverkeithing	2.5	4.0	✓		✓	✓	✓
Dalgety Bay	2.1	3.4			✓	✓	✓
Aberdour	3.6	5.8	✓		✓	✓	✓
Burntisland	3.6	5.8	✓		✓	✓	✓
Kinghorn	2.9	4.7	✓		✓	✓	✓
Kirkcaldy	3.0	4.8	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Dysart	2.5	4.0	✓			✓	
West Wemyss	2.2	3.5			✓		✓
Buckhaven	3.2	5.1			✓	✓	✓
Methil	1.6	2.6			✓	✓	✓
Leven	1.1	1.8	✓		✓	✓	✓
Lower Largo	2.7	4.3	✓		✓	✓	✓
Elie	6.9	11.1	✓		✓	✓	✓
St Monans	3.3	5.3	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Pittenweem	1.8	2.9	✓		✓	✓	✓
Anstruther	1.7	2.7	✓		✓	✓	✓
Crail	4.0	6.4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
St Andrews	13.3	21.4	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Guardbridge	5.0	8.0	✓		✓	✓	✓
Leuchars	1.6	2.6	✓		✓	✓	✓
Tayport	10.0	16.1	✓		✓	✓	✓
Newport	3.0	4.8	✓		✓	✓	✓
Wormit	2.3	3.7	✓		✓	✓	✓
Newburgh	16.0	25.7	✓		✓	✓	✓

Details of accommodation can be obtained in various ways: see page 78. In all cases you need to book well in advance, especially in smaller places; for groups it is essential. Some people prefer to use a tour operator to book their accommodation and baggage transfer as a package. As of 2021 we listed seven support services for this route, and nearly all included baggage handling: see bit.ly/fcp-support.

Camping is, of course, the ultimate low-cost and self-reliant option for overnighting, but it still needs a bit of planning. Commercial campsites are shown on our mapping pages and in the table on page 9. They are sparse enough to make it impossible to do a full expedition without resorting to wild camping (or occasional B&Bs). Although wild camping is allowed in Scotland under the Scottish Outdoor Access Code (SOAC, page 11), parts of the Fife Coastal Path pass through farmland and urban areas with few if any suitable sites.

Cyclists and the Fife Coastal Path

The FCP was designed as a walking route. Under the SOAC, access rights extend to responsible cycling. So although route sections on hard surfaces and roads may be cycled, in narrow sections or where the path is wet and muddy, please avoid making it worse by cycling on it: dismount and walk until the path becomes suitable again. Many stretches of the FCP are unsuitable for bikes of any kind, notably the parts that run on beaches, the long sections from Fife Ness to St Andrews and all offroad sections from Wormit to Newburgh – although suitable quiet roads run in parallel. Keen cyclists would do better to focus on the Kingdom Cycle Route, a circuit of 105 miles/169 km. This runs along or near the FCP between North Queensferry and Kirkcaldy, then heads inland via Glenrothes. It returns to the coast (or nearby) from St Andrews to Newburgh, then reverts inland via Kinross and Dunfermline to end at North Queensferry.

In places the Path is shared with this cycleway, and sharing demands consideration from all users. Cyclists are rightly concerned about walkers who change direction abruptly without notice, or whose dogs stray into the path of an oncoming bike. And walkers are understandably indignant when cyclists whisk past without warning, sometimes at excessive speed.

Common sense and courtesy are your best friends. Cyclists should notify their approach politely and in good time, whether by bell or voice, to allow walkers time to react. Walkers should look behind before making an unexpected move on shared sections. All users should stay in single file when they see oncoming walkers or cyclists.

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Under the SOAC, everyone has the statutory right to access to land for recreational purposes. Access rights must be exercised responsibly. They apply to most land in Scotland, including that which is privately owned, with the exceptions of gardens, farmyards and cultivated crops. For a summary of the Code, see page 11. For full details of the Code, including leaflets for dog owners and cyclists, please visit www.outdooraccess-scotland.com.

Enjoy Scotland's outdoors responsibly

Everyone has the right to be on most land and inland water providing they act responsibly. Your access rights and responsibilities are explained fully in the Scottish Outdoor Access Code.

Whether you're in the outdoors or managing the outdoors, the key things are to:

- **take responsibility for your own actions**
- **respect the interests of other people**
- **care for the environment.**

Visit outdooraccess-scotland.scot for full details. See also page 71.



**KNOW THE CODE
BEFORE YOU GO**
outdooraccess-scotland.scot

Terrain and gradients

The route uses a mixture of footpaths, beaches, tracks and cycleways, and includes some stretches of minor road. A special feature is that it skirts and crosses so many golf courses. Keep to the marked path, and try to avoid spoiling golfers' concentration. Watch out for errant golf balls, and keep any dogs under very close control.

The route is generally low-level, with mostly gentle gradients and no serious climbs. It reaches its highest point about 7 miles (11 km) short of Newburgh on the shoulder of Norman's Law: even this is only about 260 m (850 ft) above sea level. Those who seek steeper terrain will find it in side-trips and, above all, if they choose to try the Elie Chainwalk: see pages 46-7.

Nevertheless, in many places the terrain is challenging and you will need stout footwear, especially during or after wet weather. Conditions underfoot vary also according to the tides. For beach walking, many people favour crocs or river sandals (as an alternative to walking boots), and tide awareness is vital: see page 13.

