

Introduction

To enjoy this route, it is important to approach it with the right expectations. It is not the John Muir Trail (JMT), the world-famous hiking trail that runs for 215 miles through the Californian wilderness: see page 15. In sharp contrast, it's a low-level route across central Scotland that will appeal as strongly to cyclists as to walkers.

Over 134 miles (215 km) the John Muir Way (JMW) traverses the country from the Firth of Clyde at Helensburgh to John Muir's birth town Dunbar on the North Sea. As such, it passes through many villages and towns, as well as the capital city of Edinburgh, never rising above 275 m/900 ft. It appeals equally to those seeking the challenge of a single coast-to-coast expedition and to those who prefer to tackle it in sections.

On the Californian JMT, hikers carry their own tents and keep food in bear-proof canisters. By contrast, the Scottish Way is blessed with welcoming pubs, cafés and accommodation throughout its length. This appeals to those who enjoy creature comforts and a soft bed at the end of the day. And unlike the offroad JMT, parts of which are impassable from snow for much of the year, the JMW is a route for all seasons and includes stretches of tarmac. It also offers endless chances to chat with local people that you meet on the Way. For John Muir, mountains were spiritually important. He advised 'Climb the mountains and get their good tidings. Nature's peace will flow into you as sunshine flows into trees.' The canyons, glaciers and lofty pinnacles of Yosemite fired his enthusiasm and he was extremely self-reliant as a hiker. 'I am hopelessly and forever a mountaineer. I care to live only to entice people to look at Nature's loveliness.' His boyhood explorations in and around Dunbar were the wellspring of his lifelong passion for nature.

The John Muir Way includes some surprisingly remote stretches both in and around its towns. Starting from the domestic architecture of Helensburgh, it passes through Scotland's first National Park (Loch Lomond & The Trossachs), goes beside the historic canals of central Scotland, passes the engineering wonder of the Falkirk Wheel, the Roman Antonine Wall, Linlithgow Palace, the Forth Bridges and goes through Edinburgh's capital attractions to the coastal expanses of East Lothian to end at John Muir's Birthplace in Dunbar.

Dunbar's rugged coastline



1 Planning to walk the Way

Best time of year and weather

The ideal time to enjoy the John Muir Way is between May and September. In Scotland, hours of daylight are long in summer, especially from late May to late July. These months offer better chances of good weather for the 5-10 days that most people will need to complete the route. Walkers and cyclists who are tackling the entire route end-to-end will find packing lists on page 87.

Winter is better avoided, at least for a complete coast-to-coast expedition, because poor weather is more likely and short hours of daylight are certain. But if you live within striking distance and wish to complete the Way in sections, you could set off at short notice, when the immediate weather forecast is suitable. Be sure to make best use of the limited daylight on such winter forays.

Parts of the Way run through productive forest and felling operations can affect the route. This creates periodic diversions for walkers in two main areas: from the start of the route in Helensburgh (follow the Three Lochs Way instead, see page 23) and also the high route around Burncrooks Reservoir (follow the cyclist route instead, see page 27). These diversions are posted locally when in force, but check www.johnmuirway.org before you set out.

The weather in Scotland is highly variable. Statistically, the best months are May and September but good or bad weather can occur at any time of year. Conditions can change very fast: you may feel you're facing all four seasons in one day. The Way is viable in all weathers, but you must be prepared. Check the weather forecast (see page 87) and carry suitable clothing and equipment.

Which direction?

This guidebook is written for a west to east traverse from Helensburgh to Dunbar. This is the recommended direction because it puts the prevailing south-westerly wind behind you – important for walkers and even more so for cyclists. If for whatever reason you choose to traverse a section from east to west, you will find the waymarking equally helpful either way, and our mapping also works even-handedly.



Getting there and away

For most people connections with Helensburgh are easiest via Glasgow and with Dunbar via Edinburgh. Both Glasgow and Edinburgh have good rail connections with the rest of the UK, with the West Coast mainline (Virgin Trains) to London Euston and the East Coast via King's Cross. Overnight sleeper trains run daily (except Saturdays) to and from London Euston.



Getting to Helensburgh from Glasgow is easy by train, but take care to alight at the correct Helensburgh station. The train you want is from Glasgow Queen Street (low-level) to Helensburgh Central, it takes 45 minutes and there are about two trains per hour. The bus service is irregular, takes nearly two hours and is not recommended.

Getting away from Dunbar is also fast by train, with a journey time to Edinburgh of only 20 minutes and a service that is roughly hourly. (Although Dunbar is on the east coast mainline, very few intercity trains stop there, so for London and the south you may need to head first for Edinburgh.) The Edinburgh/Dunbar bus service is more frequent, about two an hour, but with a longer journey time (about 60 minutes).

For people breaking the route into sections, the public transport options are varied. Here are some pointers for access to intermediate places: note that the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline is fast and frequent (four trains per hour).

- From west to east: Balloch is served by rail (Glasgow Queen Street low-level) and bus (First Bus)
- Lennoxton, Kirkintilloch and Kilsyth are served from Glasgow by bus (First Bus); Croy station (two miles from Kilsyth) is on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline
- Falkirk High and Polmont are on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline, and Falkirk also has bus services from Glasgow and Edinburgh (First Bus)
- Linlithgow is on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline and is also served by First Bus; South Queensferry is served by Dalmeny station (from Edinburgh Waverley)
- Edinburgh has two stations (Haymarket and Waverley) on the Glasgow-Edinburgh mainline and many bus services (from St Andrew's Square and Haymarket)
- Buses run from Edinburgh via Musselburgh, Prestonpans, Aberlady and Gullane to North Berwick, and also direct to Dunbar (East Coast Buses and Borders Buses)
- First Scotrail trains run roughly hourly from Edinburgh Waverley (via Musselburgh and Prestonpans) to North Berwick (taking 35 minutes) or to Dunbar (taking 20 minutes).

Contact details for public transport are on pages 87. Always check details of your journey before making plans.

North-west from Croy Hill

How long will it take?

The number of days needed to complete the Way varies from person to person, and also depends on whether you will cycle or walk, or a bit of both. This book is arranged in ten sections, each of which can be completed in a single day by a fit hiker, but some of which (for example Balloch to Strathblane) will need to be split if you prefer shorter distances or have to combine your hike with some travel time. Know your own strengths and weaknesses, and plan accordingly.

Many cyclists may take a day for each pair of sections, thus completing the route in five days. However, some may prefer a slower pace and take up to a week, whereas fit and fast cyclists may complete the entire route in 2-4 days. However, cyclists must obey the *Towpath Code of Conduct* which clearly states 'The towpath is not suitable for cycling fast': see page 10 for more.

All sections except 3-6 and 3-8 offer route options that affect the total distance covered, in most cases by only a mile or two (2-3 km). The actual distance you will ride or walk will anyway always be greater than what is measured along the route because you need to connect with transport or accommodation. In Part 3 each section is sub-divided and distances given for each sub-section. We have maintained the above breakdown for consistency with the official website. However it may be better to end 3-8 at Port Seton which (unlike Prestonpans) has accommodation and spreads the distance better.

Various options exist for splitting the strenuous 18.2-mile Balloch-Strathblane section. On the walking route, the Attic bunkhouse and B&B are at Edenmill Farm which is under 14 miles (22 km) from Balloch. Other options involve taxis or lifts from accommodation hosts, unless you are camping or using *airbnb*. A further option would be to spend two nights at Balloch, or to shuttle to and from overnight accommodation in nearby Kilsyth or Drymen, both with a wide choice. Cyclists have very limited options at Croftamie.

In two places we recommend departure from the official route and it makes sense to consider these before finalising your itinerary. The first is Linlithgow, where the route officially bypasses the town centre but we propose detouring to include it: see pages 48-51. This adds some distance to an already short section (under 9 miles) and takes in the historic town centre, facilities and railway station. The second is Edinburgh, where we propose a shortcut to an already long section (over 16 miles): see page 60. Our route takes in the major sights of the city centre including the Royal Mile linking Castle to the Parliament and Palace. Detailed directions are included in our free download: see page 60.

Table 1 Distances and possible overnight stops



	 miles km		 miles km		pages
Helensburgh					
3-1	9-2	14-8			23-26
Balloch			27-0	44-0	
3-2	18-2	29-3			27-31
Strathblane					
3-3	13-3	21-4			32-37
Kilsyth area			26-0	41-0	
3-4	13-1	21-1			38-44
Falkirk					
3-5	8-7	14-0			45-49
Linlithgow			24-0	39-0	
3-6	14-1	22-7			50-54
South Queensferry					
3-7	16-1	25-9			55-61
Edinburgh			26-0	41-0	
3-8	10-0	16-1			62-65
Prestonpans					
3-8	16-5	26-6			66-72
North Berwick			31-0	50-0	
3-10	14-8	23-8			73-80
Dunbar					
<i>Total</i>	134	216	134	216	
<i>Average daily distance</i>	13-5	21-6	27-0	43-0	

Table 2

	B&B/hotel	hostel/ bunkhouse	pub/café	shop (food)	bike shop
Helensburgh	✓		✓	✓	✓
Balloch	✓		✓	✓	
Croftamie	✓				
Dumgoyne/Gartness			✓	✓	✓
Edenmill Farm		✓	✓	✓	
Strathblane	✓		✓	✓	
Lennoxtown	✓		✓	✓	
Kirkintilloch	✓		✓	✓	✓
Twechar	✓		✓		
Auchinstarry	✓		✓		
Bonnybridge	✓		✓	✓	
Falkirk Wheel			✓		
Falkirk	✓		✓	✓	✓
Polmont	✓		✓	✓	
Linlithgow	✓		✓	✓	✓
Bo'ness	✓		✓	✓	✓
Blackness			✓	✓	
South Queensferry	✓		✓	✓	✓
Cramond	✓		✓	✓	
Edinburgh	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
Musselburgh	✓		✓	✓	
Prestonpans			✓	✓	
Cockenzie/Port Seton	✓		✓	✓	
Longniddry	✓		✓		
Gosford Bothy			✓		
Aberlady	✓		✓	✓	
Gullane	✓		✓	✓	
Dirleton	✓		✓		
North Berwick	✓		✓	✓	✓
East Linton	✓		✓	✓	
Tynninghame			✓	✓	
Dunbar	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓

All facilities need to be checked before relying on them. Some have limited opening hours, especially out of season; others may have closed since this table was researched.

Accommodation and refreshments

Accommodation is available at all the overnight stops suggested in this book and at many other places along the Way. Most offer a selection, particularly towns such as Helensburgh, Falkirk, Linlithgow, North Berwick and Dunbar, and of course Scotland's capital Edinburgh has a very wide choice. Smaller places such as Strathblane have limited options and B&Bs are often fully booked long in advance.

Accommodation can be found by searching on the web – e.g. Google maps, visitscotland.com or www.johnmuirway.org/plan-your-trip. However, it is always advisable to book well in advance and if travelling as a group it is essential. There are only three hostels on the route: Edenmill Farm, Edinburgh and the Dolphin, Dunbar. Some people favour www.airbnb.co.uk: note that check-in times vary widely and you are unlikely to be able to leave luggage for collection. If you like to support the route via its Passport scheme, refer to page 86 for how to obtain one and where it can be stamped.