

Foreword

The Cowal Peninsula is a hidden gem which I found by accident when searching for a base for my outdoors business. Everything that the Highlands of Scotland has to offer is here and it is all within an hour or so of the central belt. After years of walking, climbing and trekking the world, I can now do it all from my own doorstep.

Cowal is rich in history, much of it based on its previous inaccessibility. Cut off by the long deep moats of Loch Fyne and Loch Long and hemmed in by the Arrochar mountains in the north, Cowal was settled from the sea. Ferries remain the main means of access, although the Loch Lomond-side road now provides a fast alternative.

The scenery of this hidden gem is typified by the stunning views of the Kyles of Bute, the tranquility of Glendaruel and the spectacular heights of the Arrochar Alps. Add to these the clan histories of the Lamonts, the Campbells and the MacLachlans, together with the many standing stones, burial cairns and rock carvings from the Stone Age and Bronze Age, and Cowal becomes a visitor's paradise.

The Loch Lomond & Cowal Way was established to connect some of the main heritage sites between the ferry at Portavadie and the road access at Loch Lomond. Stretching over 57 miles (91 km), it is a superb long-distance walk in its own right. It also links the Kintyre Way to the West Highland Way. In so doing, it runs for over half its length within the Loch Lomond and The Trossachs National Park, Scotland's first National Park. The terrain varies from the undemanding to the rather challenging. Completing the Way produces a sublime and lasting sense of achievement.

James McLuckie

West across Loch Long to the Cobbler



1 Planning and preparation

Best time of year

The Cowal peninsula seldom sees extremes of weather and the Loch Lomond & Cowal Way could in theory be walked at any time of year. However, its latitude (56° North) means that daylight varies from about 18 hours in late June to about six hours in late December. Winter (November to February) is not recommended unless you have a compelling reason. Winter walking must be timed carefully to fit the daylight available, the ground is likely to be sodden and streams are more likely to be in spate.

April, May and June are ideal months, while rhododendrons and wildflowers are at their best, with banks of primroses and bluebells on the lower ground. September and October sometimes offer settled weather, when hills are purple with heather and foliage shows its glorious autumn colours. Cowalfest, the annual outdoor festival, takes place in the autumn.

July and August are traditionally holiday months, bringing tourists to Cowal and making accommodation scarce. Finding a bed is notoriously difficult during the famous Cowal Highland Gathering (end of August): see www.cowalgathering.com. This is also the height of the season for midges (small biting insects that cause maddening itching): www.midgeforecast.co.uk.

The climate is generally moist. Cowal winters tend to be wet rather than very cold, with snow uncommon but rain and wind likely at any time of year. On high ground especially, the combination of wind and wet can create severe wind chill, so preparation and suitable clothing are essential. Before setting out, check the local weather forecast: see page 69. The weather can change very fast, so always be ready to change your plans.

Terrain and gradients

The Way includes every type of terrain from tidal beach to open moorland. The route links existing rights of way and public footpaths by means of forest tracks and some quiet public roads with a tarmac (sealed) surface.

Elsewhere, the forest roads have loose surfaces, mainly gravel. On public footpaths and certain rights of way, the going is more challenging. Expect some boggy bits unless the weather has been dry for some time. In the upland parts, the route is sometimes narrow, indistinct and steep. Although the difficult stretches are short, they reduce your overall speed to a surprising extent.

The south-west section of the Way is mostly easygoing with gentle gradients and very little altitude gain. Only the Loch Riddon stretch needs some care on the rocky path above the beach among the rhododendrons: see page 38. Timing your walk for low tide avoids some of the difficulties: see page 70 for a web source.

The route is low-level: its highest point, near the cairn shown on page 56, is at a mere 500 m (1640 ft). But don't underestimate the Way: it offers enormous variety, but at the price of some slow going, especially in the wet. Remember that rough terrain reduces your average speed, and that a group travels at the pace of its slowest member. Overall, you are unlikely to average more than 3 or 4 km/hr (2-2½ mph) unless you are seriously pushing yourselves.

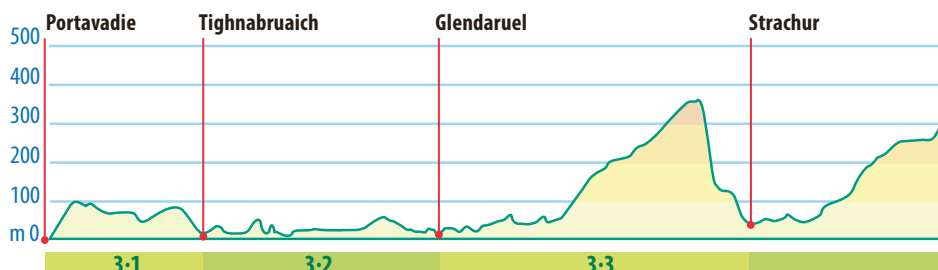
The profile below shows the contrast between the first two low-lying sections and the other three. They rise successively to 360, 350 and 500 m (1180, 1150 and 1640 ft) and only the last section can readily be split (by overnighting at Arrochar).

Previous experience

The Loch Lomond & Cowal Way is not the ideal choice for your very first long-distance walk, although in fair conditions any healthy person could complete it within five days. But it's never advisable to do your first long hike alone, so seek the company of a more experienced walker. In the sections north of Strachur, if cloud or mist descends, one of you may need to be competent in using map and compass.



Stony path above Lochgoilhead





Wintry conditions near the summit of the Way

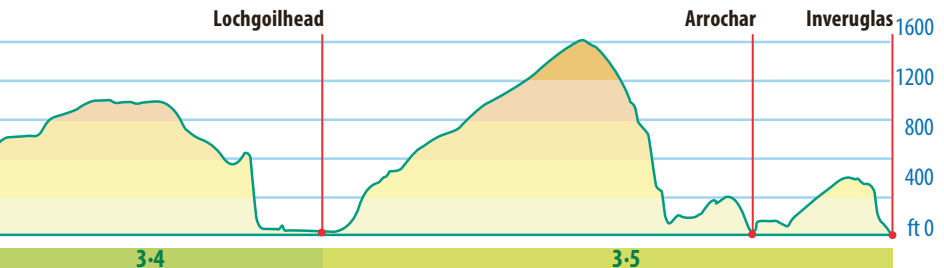
Whatever your experience, before leaving for Cowal, do several all-day walks, if possible on consecutive days, to test your footwear and to build up fitness. If you will be carrying your belongings for the whole trip, practise hiking with a laden rucksack. Don't underestimate the longer sections, particularly in energy-sapping, windy or wet conditions.

If walking alone or in adverse conditions, always leave a note of your expected arrival time and place. Read page 59 if you intend to climb the Cobbler.

For advice on choosing and buying gear, obtain our *Notes for Novices*: see page 71.



Stepping stones beside Loch Riddon



Days, stages and duration

This guidebook follows the recommended direction, from south-west to north-east. This allows for a gentle start on low-lying terrain, as well as for travel time to Portavadie, which can be reached direct by bus from Dunoon, and which has overnight accommodation. Walking in this direction, the higher, more challenging sections come later, when you are well into your stride.

The final stage from Lochgoilhead to Inveruglas makes a long haul, leading to a late finish at a place with limited accommodation. It can readily be broken by an overnight at Arrochar. You could seize the opportunity to climb the famous Cobbler next day (see page 59), and then complete the walk to Inveruglas. Or, if you're out of time, you can return to Glasgow quickly by walking to Arrochar & Tarbet station (see page 60) or by catching a bus.

The Way begins at Portavadie, where the ferry arrives from Tarbert (Loch Fyne), the northern terminus of the Kintyre Way. It finishes at Inveruglas, where in season a Water Bus ferries people across Loch Lomond to the West Highland Way: see page 70. For ambitious walkers, therefore, the Way makes a potential link between the southern tip of Kintyre and Fort William at the northern end of the West Highland Way, or even, via the Great Glen Way, all the way to Inverness.

Table 1 presents the Way in five sections, with distances and overnight stops as in the detailed description in Part 3. Many people will follow this linear sequence. Unless you are supported by vehicles with drivers, or can co-ordinate lifts or public transport carefully, you may be carrying a heavy load, or at least your overnight things, spare clothing and a packed lunch. You may prefer to use services ranging from baggage transfer to full support packages: visit bit.ly/LLC-support.

Some will prefer to tackle the Way in sections, which can be completed in any order, as five or six day-walks, or split over a couple of long weekends. If approaching it as day-walks, don't underestimate the driving times to start and finish. Although distances are modest, average speeds can be low, especially on single-track roads where you need to wait in passing places (marked by white diamonds) to pass oncoming traffic and to permit overtaking. In Cowal, all unclassified roads, most B roads and even some A roads are single-track for miles on end.

If walking the Way end-to-end, consider allowing more than five or six walking days for your holiday. This would allow you to split the longer days, to take a break to see local sights, or to have a rest day in bad weather. If time is short, sections 1 and 2 could be combined, but four days is the sensible minimum even for fit walkers.

The Way is more suited to walkers than to cyclists. Cyclists may have to push or carry their bikes for about 30% of the distance in order to comply with the Scottish Outdoor Access Code: see page 16. Nevertheless, enthusiasts with suitable bikes and tyres have been known to complete the route within a day.

Table 1		
Distances & overnight stops (five-day walk)		
	miles	km
Portavadie		
	6.6	10.6
Tighnabruaich		
	11.0	17.7
Glendaruel		
	15.7	25.3
Strachur		
	8.7	14.0
Lochgoilhead		
	14.6	23.4
Inveruglas		
Total	56.6	91.0