

WEST HIGHLAND WAY



Scotland

Glen Etive from Kings House Hotel

OPPOSITE
Deer at Kings House Hotel, looking toward Buachaille Etive Mor and the mouth of Glen Coe

Scotland's most famed outdoor hiking adventure begins 20 minutes outside Glasgow at a stone obelisk in a pedestrian mall in the town of Milngavie. The first miles showcase all the charms of suburbia: shopping, construction, and parking lots.

But have patience, because the early miles hardly portend what lies ahead. Some 30,000 hikers complete the entire 95-mile West Highland Way every year; another 50,000 or so do shorter segments of it. They aren't here for the shopping.

Conceived in the 1960s, and officially opened in 1980, Scotland's first official long-distance footpath connects the central lowlands of Scotland with the heart of the Scottish Highlands. It earns its reputation among the world's great walks with a combination of loch-shore scenery, desolate north-latitude mountain landscapes, and the chance to take a side trip to the top of Great Britain's highest peak.

The suburban streets near Glasgow soon give way to forested paths as the trail reaches the promisingly named forest of Mugdock. The trail's waymarks, adorned with a Scottish thistle, lead onward, following hiking paths, old military roads, and drovers' paths through scenic glens, over ridges and moors, and past all kinds of bodies of water: sea lochs, freshwater lochs, rivers, and tiny streams. Highlights include the pastoral landscapes beneath the Campsies (the birthplace of Scottish skiing), the serene beauty of Loch Lomond (Scotland's largest lake, measured by surface area), the majestic and temperamental Highlands, expansive Rannoch Moor (an important ecological area), the Devil's Staircase (named for the difficulty of building a road there), historic Glencoe (the site of one of the most notorious slaughters in Scottish history), and Loch Leven (the largest lowland loch in Scotland).

The mountains here are relatively low—the trail goes as low as sea level and rises to a high point of only 1,800 feet. But the trail offers the opportunity to climb Ben Lomond, which, at 3,185 feet, is the southernmost of Scotland's Munros (mountains with elevations of more than 3,000 feet). The trail also passes the base of Ben Nevis, the highest peak not only in Scotland, but in all of the British Isles, a collapsed volcano that rises to 4,409 feet. Regardless of the modest-sounding elevations, the often treeless mountainsides and the



prominence of the mountains looming above expansive valleys give these peaks the feel of much higher mountains. The summit of Ben Nevis is irresistible, a chance to cap the journey with a literal peak experience. But don't expect to be alone: some 100,000 people make the ascent every year. The trail ends at an obelisk in Fort William.

The popularity of the West Highland Way has had both costs and benefits. On the trail, too many boots tromping through too much mud causes erosion. On the other hand, a constant stream of hikers encourages the development of businesses whose services have made the trail accessible to all levels of walkers. With inns spread at regular intervals along the trail, there is no need to carry camping gear, not to mention backpacking food and stoves. There is, however, a need for reservations, as pubs and inns book up during the high season.

The trail is known as an ideal mountain trail for beginning hikers because it stays fairly low yet winds

Sailboat on Loch Leven
near the town of Glencoe

OPPOSITE
Cattle along West Highland
Way between Milngavie
and Drymen





through mountainous terrain, and because it is well marked and easy to follow. Although the majority of hikers do self-guided hikes, guide services are available for those who don't feel confident on their own. In addition, local businesses will book accommodations and arrange to transport baggage from one town to the next. For those who prefer, wild camping is allowed along almost all of the route. With services along the trail, consistent waymarks, and a route that rises high enough for views but not so high as to tempt the thunderstorm gods, the West Highland Way is manageable for fit and determined walkers. Most hikers complete the trail in about a week, walking in a northerly direction to save the drama of the high peaks for last.

Challenges along the trail include that implacable Scottish duo, midges and weather. Midges (small biting flies) begin swarming in May and last well into August. Head nets, clothing that covers the skin, and insect repellent will all help (local pubs sell Skin-so-Soft, which has a reputation for repelling midges). But the best respite comes when it rains, which it does—often. Other challenges include some steep climbs, including a particularly daunting stretch along the shores of Loch Lomond, and exposure to potentially severe wind and weather on some of the highest ridges. May is the most popular month for hiking, but the trail can be hiked spring through fall and even in winter—although only experienced hikers with winter skills and equipment should attempt it.

In June 2010, the West Highland Way was designated as part of the International Appalachian Trail, an ambitious attempt to link long-distance paths in North America and Europe. The network will one day run from southern Florida up to Newfoundland, then jump across the ocean to follow trails through Greenland, Iceland, Scotland, and England, before hopping the channel to Europe and heading south to end—somewhat unbelievably—in the Atlas Mountains of Morocco.

OPPOSITE

Loch Lomond from near the top of Conic Hill

Bridge of Orchy over the River Orchy (top); abandoned boot along West Highland Way (bottom)

