

WALKING ADVENTURE ON THE GREAT GLEN WAY

Written by Emma Harrison

THE TRAIL

The Great Glen Way is a stunning long distance, off-road trail in the Scottish Highlands, running from Fort William to Inverness. At points, you will have a choice to take a low route or a high route. Both routes offer great trail walking and dramatic views, especially from the high route, as you'd probably expect! From Fort William, you will make your way over the characterful Caledonian Canal, weaving your way through beautiful forests overlooking rewarding views of lochs, including well-known Loch Ness, with a chance to spot Nessie!

Starting in Fort William, you will discover the outdoor capital of the UK, with Ben Nevis towering above you. Fort William is a great place to discover, with its range of cafes, bookshops, and outdoor shops. From there, you will indulge in beautiful scenery passing through many smaller community sites, including Gairloch, Laggan, Fort Augustus, Invermoriston, and the not-so-hidden gem, Drumnadrochit. By the time you have reached the finishing point in Inverness, you may well be ready for some civilization, or maybe you will have enjoyed the tranquility of the trail so much that you'll want to extend your walk. For those who have time on their hands, the trail could perhaps be combined with the West Highland Way, which usually ends but could start at Fort William, but this is not to be underestimated and would need to be researched in full before committing.

LOGISTICS, TERRAIN, KIT & SHOPS

The Great Glen Way is around 73 miles long, but differs depending on variations you may decide to take. You should arrive self-sufficient with food, water, and enough clothing to last your journey - with both good and bad weather options at hand because the Scottish Highlands can have every season in one day! Transporting your kit can be made much easier by hiring Loch Ness Hub & Travel to help shuttle your baggage to each of your chosen accommodations. Not only for weight purposes, but for ease and comfort. Loch Ness Hub & Travel is a non-for-profit organisation, with all proceeds going straight back into the community of Drumnadrochit, which, incidentally, is a must-see stop on the trail.

The trail can be split up into as many days as you wish. You should have good research into the villages before you decide on the duration of your trip as there are some exceptional walks in the area, wildlife to spot and points of interest to view. Depending on your choice of pace and/or fitness level, it can take anything from 4- 12 days to walk, which depends entirely on how much time you have. Some stay for longer, some, like me, stay forever! There are plenty of accommodation options in the different areas, but be aware, this is a popular trail and booking in advance is most definitely recommended.

Over the course of the route, you will walk the whole length of Loch Lochy, Loch Oich and Loch Ness. For the ascent, it depends on whether you pick the lower-level route, or the higher-level route. The lower level has 1239m (4035ft) of climbing overall, with the higher route at 1835m (6020ft). As you will imagine, there are some steep sections involved, but all manageable for most.

The route is undulating, but it is mostly compact and good underfoot, so all you need is a pair of decent, sturdy shoes. It's worth noting that some of the terrain could be made more challenging in bad weather - muddy, loose with rocks, wet, and rough, so make sure you plan accordingly, check the weather forecast before you set out, and consider waterproof footwear. Thankfully, the hills are well spaced out, so there will be many opportunities for breaks - plus, stopping to admire the landscape will keep you occupied rather than worrying about lumpy sections. The route takes you on a rollercoaster in parts, but it's friendly, so strap in and enjoy the ride!

In terms of how long your route sections will take you will depend on your normal pace and what terrain you are used to. Though the climbing is undulating, it's climbing nonetheless, and the downhill towards the end of the route can take some time if you are not overly confident. That said, this trail is accessible for most, but it's always good to be prepared for the unexpected. There are some great descriptions available online, so it's worth reading into the difficulty of the sections first - so there are no nasty surprises!

There are some shops en route, including a large supermarket in Fort William as you set off, smaller shops in Fort Augustus, Invermoriston and Drumnadrochit, and lots of choice as you finish in Inverness for the celebrations! The local shops are well served, with some delicious fresh sandwiches in Fort Augustus, local produce in Invermoriston Community Store, and plenty of cafes in Drumnadrochit. Glen Rowan in Invermoriston offer particularly great cakes, and Cafe 82 in Drumnadrochit offers some fantastic meals too. If you venture half a mile out of Drumnadrochit, you'll also find Drumbui Farm B & B and Quila Cridhe Tearoom that have some of the best scones I've ever tasted. The shops also sell mud nets in case you decide to visit in May to September - but you will soon discover that they are the only type of visitor that will be made to feel unwelcome!

The route is well signposted but ensure you have information and/or maps to refer to. GPX files can be found on numerous websites, so uploading them to your smartwatches or apps is easy. You can also buy maps of the area from Loch Ness Hub & Travel Hub as backup to be absolutely prepared.

HOW TO GET THERE, WHERE TO STAY & WHEN TO GO

HOW TO GET THERE

The easiest way to start the trail depends completely on where you are coming from. If travelling from Inverness (reached from major cities by bus, train, and flights), you can take a CityLink bus to Fort William, which takes around 1 hour 30 minutes, passing gorgeous Loch Ness by your side. If traveling from the Glasgow area, you can easily take a train ride to Fort William, passing through Milngavie.

Whichever way you choose to arrive, Loch Ness Hub & Travel offer many packages. The staff are super friendly and understand outdoor people and why we do what we do. Encouraging, full of information, and providing service with a smile are all provided for your adventure. They make you feel at ease! Some of the offerings they can arrange for you include;

- An option to split the last and longest leg in two, offering a bookable shuttle service for baggage transfer customers, allowing you to take in the fabulous new highest point on the trail and only trail point with 360 degree views
- A pick up from Inverness to the start of the trail (they will also store your bags)
- A pick up from the end of your first day on the trail to the accommodation booked along the whole route
- A pick up from the end of the trail back to Drumnadrochit



ACCOMMODATION PROVIDERS

There are plenty of accommodation providers available in all the areas that you will pass through, and there's a good mix of hostels, campsites, B&B's, self-catering and hotels. You could also consider camping in some of the sites if you wish. However, if comfort is key for you, the areas to look for accommodation include:

- **Fort William**
- **Gairloch/ Spean Bridge**
 - Spean Bridge is off route, but offers lots of lovely B&B options!
- **South Laggan/Invergarry**
- **Fort Augustus**
- **Invermoriston**
- **Drumnadrochit**
- **Inverness**

A few recommendations;

- **Fort William:**
 - Myrtle Bank
 - Guisachan Guest House

Spean Bridge:

- Coir Glas
- Distant Hills

South Laggan/Invergarry:

- Forest Lodge GH
- Invergarry Hotel

Fort Augustus:

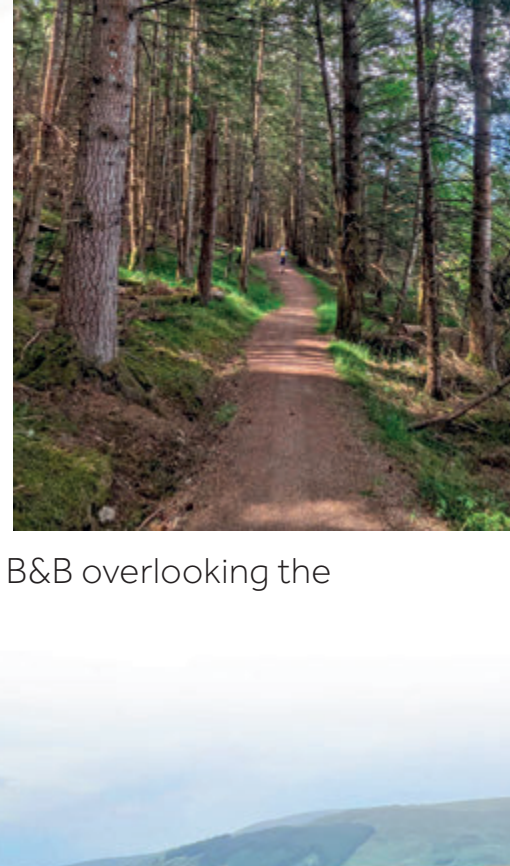
- Oaklands
- Bank House

Invermoriston:

- Bracarina
- Glenmoriston Arms

Drumnadrochit:

- Loch Ness Inn
- Kilmore Farmhouse B&B



ITINERARY

As a local, I have walked this route many times and have split this up differently each time, depending on my time pressures at that moment. My favourite way to complete the route is walking this over 7 days, as there are chances to go off route occasionally to explore points of interest, enjoy picnics, and take in the views from the lovely benches - who doesn't love a peanut butter sandwich overlooking Caledonian forests and lochs?! For this blog, I am going to document my experience of walking the route over 7 days to give a good overview of the trail, and what you can expect to find - which is more than you might think!

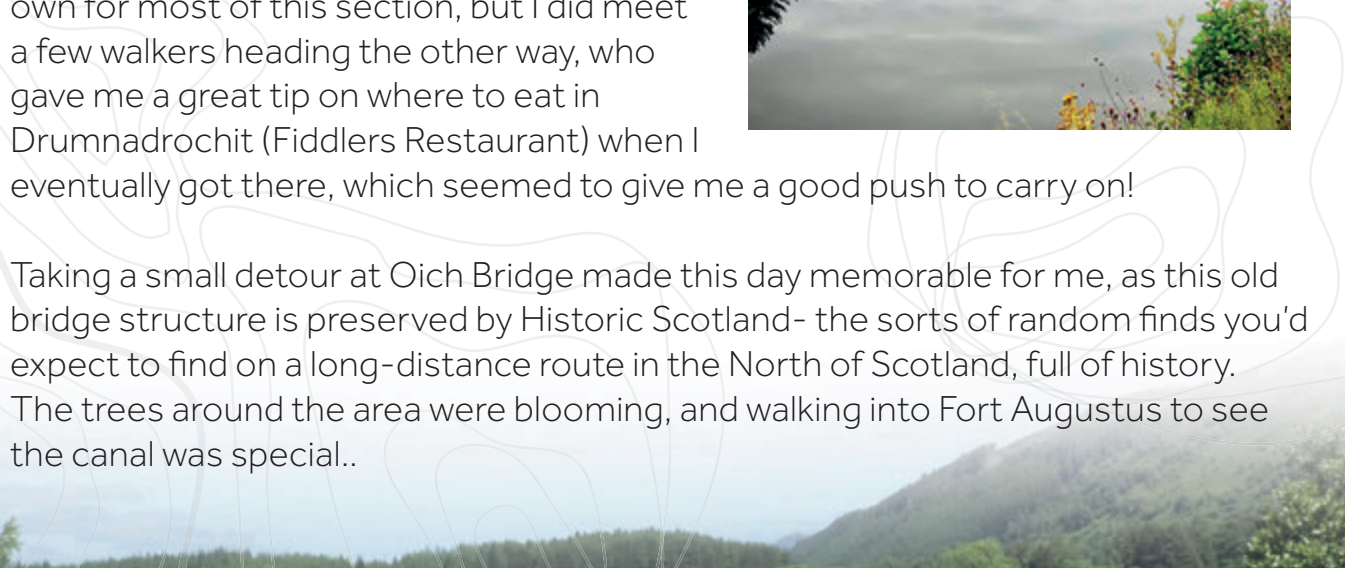
THE ROUTE

DAY 1:

Fort William to Gairloch

17km/10.5 miles

Day one! Starting in Fort William, you will thoroughly enjoy the beautiful views over Loch Linnhe where there are boats bobbing around in the water, with views of all the monster mountains ahead. The official start of the Great Glen Way is basically a roundabout, but this will be quickly forgiven as you step onto the pleasant coastal path, encouraging you to get into the adventure spirit, which I certainly did! The next part is flat and easy walking on the Caledonian Canal, which is impressive. You will soon find yourself at famous Neptunes Staircase (8 bridges on the canal) which in my opinion, is a unique treat, and tourists flock just to catch a glimpse!



The forest tracks that follow also allow for even quicker progress, and the views are sensational. For me, this section of the walk feels tranquil, peaceful, and, given the terrain, it's easy to get into a rhythm. Eventually, views of the River Lochy will appear, and when I eventually reached Loch Lochy (that's its real name, honest!), all I wanted to do was jump in!

On arrival at Gairloch, there were lovely B&B options to stay in, or the campsite, which offers one-night stays, but I had already planned to stay in Distant Hills - a gorgeous little B&B overlooking the Fort William gians.



DAY 2:

Gairloch to Invergarry

25km/15 miles

After a true Scottish full breakfast, I was set up for the day! The path now passes its way around Loch Lochy, with a great chance to gaze at the huge Munros (I call them the Loch Lochy Hills) ahead, with Corbett Ben Tee hiding the desolate Glen Dessary and Loch Arkalg - all there for another day.

If you get the chance to re-visit the area or have an opportunity to extend your stay, these hills are quite special. With terrific views, being on the higher ground gives you a real perspective of the area and the lochs that lie beneath the mountains. However, on this walk, I settled for the many attractive trees to look at - oak, birch, elm, rowan and hazel, all native to the region. In Autumn, these trees look particularly sensational! This is another easy terrain day, which meant faster moving and more time to eat my picnic in quiet areas overlooking the loch - idyllic by anyone's standards.

When at Clunes, I made a detour (2k each way) to see the Eas Chia-aig waterfall, as the water level was high at the time of visiting and therefore was well worth having a look. It's a small climb, but well worth the experience. Remote, wild, beautiful.



After my day of mountain viewing, waterfalls, and fantastic forestry, I was ready for my night's sleep at the Invergarry Hotel, which was clean, comfortable and welcoming. There was food available too, even better! You can stay at Laggan Lochs rather than Invergarry, making the day shorter, but I had opted for a longer day as I was feeling good.

DAY 3:

Invergarry to Fort Augustus

19km (12 miles)

There is little to no climbing today, but what it lacks in ascent, it makes up for in views.

Walking next to the canal felt familiar, which was comforting, but then suddenly I was led to walk along the side of Loch Oich in the pinewoods. Though I missed the continuity of the canal, I particularly enjoyed the Loch Oich section as it felt very soothing, and today was a sunny day, so I loved seeing the sun peek through the branches. I was on my own for most of this section, but I did meet a few walkers heading the other way, who gave me a head tip on where to eat in Drumnadrochit (Fiddlers Restaurant) when I eventually got there, which seemed to give me a good push to carry on!



Taking a small detour at Oich Bridge made this day memorable for me, as this old bridge structure is preserved by Historic Scotland - the sorts of random finds you'd expect to find on a long-distance route in the North of Scotland, full of history. The trees around the area were blooming, and walking to Fort Augustus to see the canal was special.



Fort Augustus is a popular spot, so it got much busier nearer the village, but with plenty of options for food and accommodation, it felt much more like I was in civilisation. I opted to stay at Bank House, a lovely locally run B&B. I bought snacks for tea in the village as it was a nice night for a picnic, but when I return, I'd love to try the food at the Lovat Restaurant (Station Road) as I met a lot of people who recommend it for a special occasion.

DAY 4:

Fort Augustus to Invermoriston

12km (8 miles)

I opted to plan a shorter day today as I knew the ascent was going to go from barely any to around 500m of climbing. But I know the ground wasn't going to be quite as challenging as I originally thought, I may have pushed on to Drumnadrochit, but I enjoyed the day nonetheless. I always take the higher routes for a better view! However, since I have tried both options, I feel they have something different to offer - both just as spectacular.



Setting back off from Fort Augustus, I grabbed a lovely local sandwich from the shop at the garage (absolutely delicious). The next short climb is really worth the effort, especially when a gap in the trees fully exposes Loch Ness, with a bench to sit and soak up the views. This is a view I never get bored with, despite living close to the area! There is a small island around here that can be seen called Cherry Island, but despite its name, it is home to just a couple of spruce trees. The route today has so many fantastic views of the loch, some real pinch-me moments. The cloud was quite low, which created an eerie atmosphere too - I took a lot of photos this day, the views were too good not to remember!



The route was bumpy in parts, but there were no real obstacles other than the odd rooty and muddy section. I zig-zagged my way down to Invermoriston in time for the cake shop - Glen Rowan, which I thoroughly recommend. Then, after having a little exploration of the river and a viewpoint (signposted) from the village car park, I stayed in the Glenmoriston Arms Hotel where I also had a delicious dinner. There are other options for accommodation, including B&B's around here, and most require pre-bookings.



DAY 5:

Invermoriston to Drumnadrochit

22km (14 miles)

Today's route is harder once more, with around 750m of climbing, so it was the toughest day so far for me. However, I was very aware there was a 'View Catcher' sculpture made out of wood and stone, so I was really energised to push on and view it for myself!

It had been wet for a few weeks, so the greenery today was really lush, and the bridge felt like something out of a fairy movie. When you think the viewpoints can't get any better from the previous days, today's views will take you by surprise. An outdoor haven for anyone who loves trails, listening to nature, seeing nature (if you're lucky), and enjoying the colours of the woodlands and loch. Though following a major road, you are so high up the top of the trail that you wouldn't know it, amongst the trees looking over the area like a hawk - a real birds-eye view. The high route meets the low today, as you pop out in the woods near Drumnadrochit, where you will need to walk down a very steep hill, back in the village. Be warned, this steep hill does take quite some time - but fear not, there are some hearty meals awaiting you!

There are some lovely Highland cows to see, local ice-creams, plenty of places to eat, and some great accommodation too - including the Loch Ness Inn. I really enjoyed staying here, and hands down, this was one of the best beef burgers around. I'd highly recommend you book in advance as this place gets very busy (for good reasons!).

Loch Ness Hub & Travel Hub are right in the centre of the village, so if you're looking for more information on just about anything, you're in the right place. I would recommend popping in to say hello to their friendly team. I was super excited to buy a Great Glen Way T-shirt here, and I couldn't resist the cap and badge too, for some lasting memories of the trip!

DAY 6:

11km (7 miles)

Abriachan to Drumnadrochit

This is a lovely stretch, with a 360 viewpoint all around - amazing. However, I had never managed to spend any time in Abriachan. Rather than walking Drumnadrochit to Abriachan, Loch Ness Hub & Transport had recommended that I take a shuttle bus to Abriachan (930am) and walk back to Drumnadrochit, to stay a second night. This worked well for me, as this cuts out a huge hill climb out of the village, and allows for more gazing at the views.

Being able to spend a little time at Abriachan was worth taking a bus for - it allowed me to have an exploration of the loch, as well as looking at the many carved wooden statues. The area is very well maintained, with a great sense of pride from the community - there's even stargazing available on an evening!

The high path is undulating, and the views looking over the loch, and over to the other side of Loch Ness are always impressive. The forest trail was well-worn, and well-trodden, as it continued to drop down through a dark, atmospheric forest. Eventually, you will drop next to a house, and back to the roadside into Drumnadrochit - a wholesome day!

I saw lots of nature on this section, with woodpeckers, red squirrels and lots of birds including some red kites. The next day, I had arranged for the Loch Ness Hub & Transport to pick me up and take me back to my starting point at Abriachan. This evening I decided to eat at Fiddlers as per recommended by fellow walkers, and I couldn't resist the fish and chips - which made my full day feel so worthwhile.

DAY 7:

Abriachan to Inverness

19km (12 miles)

I was picked up at 9.30am, and dropped off at my starting point in Abriachan (Woodend) by a very cheerful driver. The locals in the area have a real passion for what's on the doorstep, and I was excited to get started again.

The glow of the sun shining through the forest was simply beautiful, and I practically skipped my way along the route, passing an eco-campsite with coffee available. The next section was tarmac for quite some time (2.3 miles) but feeling so high up and on top of the world, it somehow didn't matter. There are some stunning views over the Black Isle and back towards Glen Urquhart and Glen Affric. After a very short climb back into the woodland, I looked out for pine martens, which I sadly didn't see, but had spoken to someone who had.

Nevertheless, I saw more squirrels and thoroughly enjoyed my walk through the woods listening to the creaky trees. Eventually, after a straight path for quite some time, I descended into Inverness. The path takes you past Kings Golf Course, and back onto the Caledonian Canal once more, before heading through the 'Islands', a popular walk near the centre of Inverness. The finale was at Inverness Castle, which, at the time of exploring, was getting ready for its grand opening as a reformed museum. Knowing Inverness, I went straight to the Black Isle Bar for a local pint of beer and stone-baked pizza - the perfect end to a wonderful trail.

CONCLUSION

A fantastic trail, with differing terrain. Canals one day, forests the next, and pure woodland throughout. It is wild, yet tranquil, and offers great opportunities to spot wildlife. The route stays off main roads as much as possible, yet is adaptable to enable you to taste local cuisine and learn more about the communities in the area.

There are varying accommodation options on offer, from budget to luxurious, and the route is a real highlight and asset to the destination.