

# Long-distance walks in Scotland

By Jacquetta Megarry  
(Rucksack Readers)



Beinn Bheula – the watershed on the Cowal Way between Loch Long and Loch Goil

Photo: Jacquetta Megarry



Photo: Jacquetta Megarry

**While Scotland doesn't have a Pacific Crest Trail or a traverse of a 400-mile mountain range, its rich offering of long-distance walks ranges from unmarked, find-your-own-way routes through remote backcountry, to waymarked routes, to 'tamer' terrain with soft beds available each night. This article is about the latter; to keep its length within bounds it covers walks of at least 56 miles/90 km**

Having embarked on my first long-distance walk at the great age of 50, I then stumbled into publishing guidebooks for walkers and climbers. I clearly remember, as a novice walker, how much I appreciated the help of waymarking and guidebooks to make a start.

Since long-distance walkers tend to use public transport, their environmental impact is low. And because they tend to buy accommodation, food and drink in the villages that they pass through, they benefit the rural economy. The inspirational quality of the walks brings people from afar and attracts publicity, sponsored walks and tourism spending.

It's hard to say how many such walks Scotland has. Scottish Natural Heritage decreed there are four, in

order of completion (1980-2002): the West Highland Way, Southern Upland Way, the Speyside Way and the Great Glen Way. These Long Distance Routes (LDRs) are defined by standards of maintenance, percentage of road-walking and thistle-in-hexagon waymarking. Yet England and Wales have around 20 National Trails, all officially waymarked and recognised. Ireland has more than 45 Waymarked Ways, some of which are mainly road-walking. And Scotland has many fine walks that offer support services, waymarking and publications that are not, and never will be, LDRs.

The table on the facing page shows 14 walks that fall within the rough bounds set for this article, and provides basic data on them. I have excluded the Sir Walter Scott Way:

although it's long enough, it is little more than a chunk of the Southern Upland Way and relies on SUW waymarking. I have also excluded projects under development, such as the Carrick Way and NAVE-Nortrail (international North Sea), and incompletely defined walks, such as the Cape Wrath Trail (a 200-mile idea originally published in a beautiful book by David Paterson in 1996, unsuitable for the inexperienced) and the Pilgrim's Way that Roseanna Cunningham proposed to link Iona with St Andrews, on which SNH has been consulting and reporting.

From a practical viewpoint, important features of long walks include:

- a) overall length: for how long do you need to be self-reliant?
- b) shape: is it linear, leaving you to find your way to the

start and back from the finish, or a loop?

- In terms of support for the less experienced walker, four key questions are:
- c) Is it waymarked, and if so is the marking complete and consistent?
- d) Is there a reliable, up-to-date map and/or guidebook and/or website?
- e) Is there accommodation at suitable intervals (somewhere between 12 and 20 miles) throughout the walk?
- f) Is there a baggage transfer service?

Although not every walk in the table below ticks all these boxes, they all have clearly defined routes and that information is publicly available. Any could form the basis of a credible week's walking holiday.

There the similarities end. It is difficult to convey the sheer range of scenery, wildlife and terrain that they encompass. I haven't walked them all, though for 10 of the 14 I have published guidebooks and have the special enthusiasm that the experience brought.

Maps for long-distance routes can be problematic: I once met some hikers on the West Highland Way who had bought all ten OS Explorers at a cost of £80. The maps stayed in their rucksacks all week, and they envied the Footprint route map in my trouser pocket (£4.95). I recommend Footprint maps, and also the more expensive Harvey route maps: all are waterproof.

The provenance of the walks ranges widely: several were created from scratch as the vision of a single individual (Arran Coastal Way, Cowal Way, East Highland Way), whereas the LDRs owe their existence to government and council funding and management committees. Some walks are run by Trusts and charities, such as the Kintyre Way (Long and Winding Way) and the Fife Coastal Path (Fife Coast and Countryside Trust), sometimes with involvement from SNH or local councils and/or VisitScotland.

The Rob Roy Way sprang jointly from the efforts of two

walking enthusiasts, myself and John Henderson. We had been working independently on two different routes to Pitlochry, his from Aberfoyle and mine from Milngavie. We agreed to reconcile our ideas as a single trail from Drymen to Pitlochry under the title Rob Roy Way.

We worked closely to develop the route, and launched it in 2002 with the published guidebook and website. The route follows existing footpaths, forest roads, some minor roads and the well-signposted Cycle Route 7. Thanks to its popularity, and particularly to the annual Rob Roy Challenge, funds were found for some waymarking and support services have sprung up.

The Ayrshire Coastal Path is unique in that it was the project chosen by the Rotary Club of Ayr to celebrate the centenary of Rotary International, although it must owe a great deal to the efforts of Jimmy Begg, who ran the project and wrote the guidebook.

The Kintyre Way was set up by local businesses, but with major support from the Forestry Commission Scotland and Highlands and Islands Enterprise. The models vary, the diversity is enormous, but all testify to the demand for more long-distance routes.



A rocky coastline on the Arran Coastal Way

Photo: Jacquetta Megarry



Map: Rucksack Readers

	miles	km	type	location	website
Arran Coastal Way	65	105	circular	Starts/finishes Brodick	www.coastalway.co.uk
Ayrshire Coastal Path	100	161	linear	Gleapp to Skelmolie	www.ayrshirecoastalpath.org
Borders Abbeys Way	68	109	circular	Starts/finishes Jedburgh	www.bordersabbeyway.co.uk
Cateran Trail	64	103	circular	Starts/finishes at Blairgowrie	www.pkct.org
Cowal Way	57	92	linear	Portavadie to Inveruglas	www.cowalway.org.uk
East Highland Way	75	121	linear	Fort William to Aviemore	www.easthighlandway.com
Fife Coastal Path	93	150	linear	North Queensferry to Tay Bridge	www.fifecoastalpath.co.uk
Great Glen Way	73	117	linear LDR	Fort William to Inverness	www.greatglenway.com
Kintyre Way	87	140	linear	Tarbert to Dunaverty Bay	www.kintyreway.com
Rob Roy Way	79	126	linear	Drymen to Pitlochry	www.robroyway.fsnet.co.uk
St Cuthbert's Way	62	100	linear	Melrose to Lindisfarne	www.stcuthbertsway.fsnet.co.uk
Southern Upland Way	212	341	linear LDR	Portpatrick to Cocksburnpath	www.southernuplandway.gov.uk
Speyside Way	80	129	linear LDR	Buckie to Aviemore	www.speysideway.org
West Highland Way	95	152	linear LDR	Milngavie to Port William	www.west-highland-way.co.uk

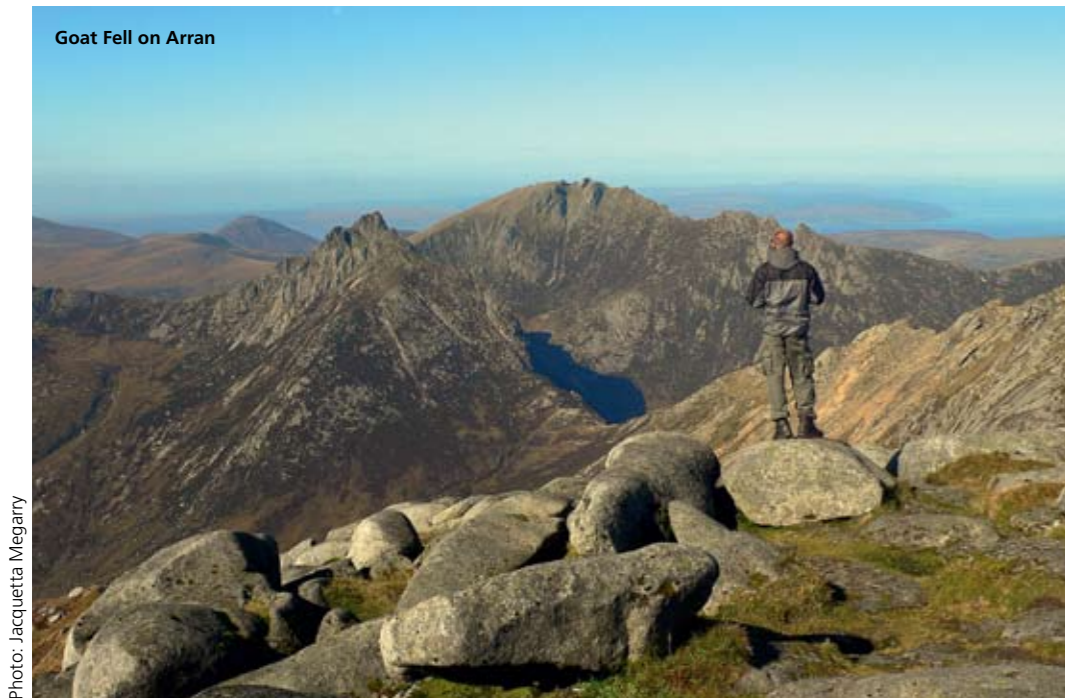


Photo: Jacquetta Megarry

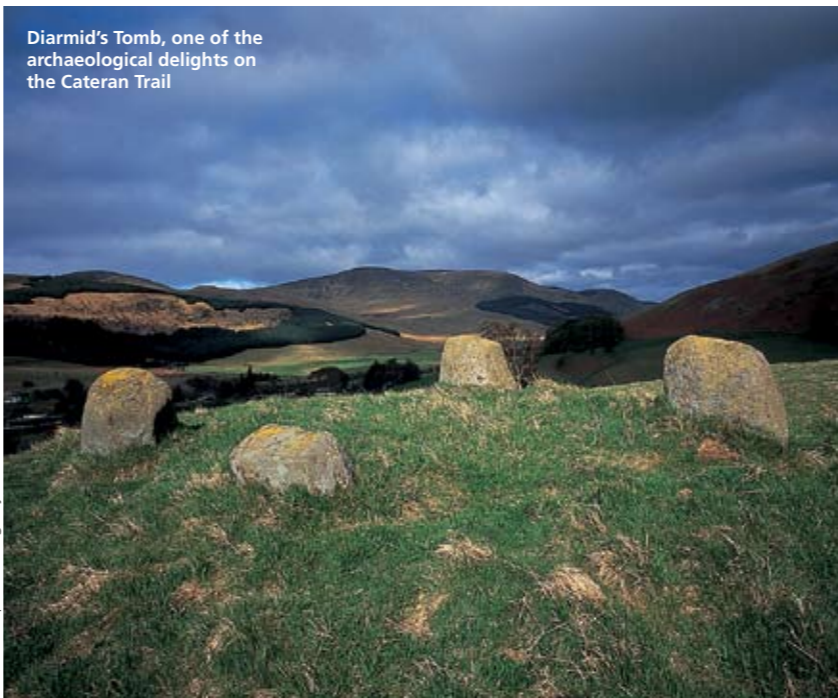


Photo: Jacquetta Megarry



Photo: Kevin Langan

**Arran Coastal Way**

Famous as 'Scotland in miniature', Arran is accessible from Glasgow by train and ferry from Ardrossan. This mainly coastal route has views of the Clyde islands, Kintyre and Ailsa Craig and you can be sure of wildlife sightings from seal and red squirrel to red deer, and even basking shark and otter.



Highlights include Goat Fell, the island's summit, the rich history and prehistory of the King's Cave and Machrie Moor standing stones, a day-trip to Holy Island and boulder-hopping through the Scridnan Rock Fall and around Bennan Head. The boulder fields vary from strenuous to occasionally impassable, depending on the tide and sea state, so you need to check tide times.

The Arran Coastal Way by Jacquetta Megarry (Rucksack Readers, 2008, £10.99)

**Ayrshire Coastal Path**

The quoted 100 miles includes 'essential detours' to Burns Heritage Park, Dundonald Castle Visitor Centre and

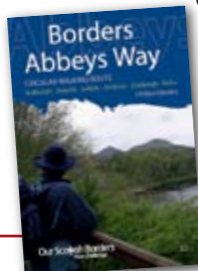
Kilwinning Abbey, and the town of Ayr is close to its mid-point. In the south it begins at Glenapp, which has recently been connected with Stranraer by the 11-mile Lochryan Coastal Path. It then heads through Ballantrae and Girvan to Ayr and continues through Troon. It then swings inland to Irvine, hugs the coast from Ardrossan to Largs, and finishes with a minor inland loop to Skelmorlie.

Most section distances are six to 10 miles, rated by the guidebook as easy or moderate, with a few short sections (150-300m) that demand rocky scrambles and where safety depends on awareness of the tidal state. The route links sandy beaches and passable shore with field-edge paths, wrack roads, farm tracks and some disused railway track.

Ayrshire Coastal Path: the official guide book by James Begg (Rotary Club of Ayr, 2008, £12)

**Borders Abbeys Way**

This circular walk links the Borders towns and villages of Jedburgh, Hawick, Selkirk, Melrose, Dryburgh and Kelso and its main features are the fine ruined abbeys



and turbulent history of the area. It fits comfortably into five days with only one long day (18 miles Melrose/Kelso) and the rest ranging from 10 to 14.5 miles. The area is rich in wildlife as well as history. Part of the route is shared with St Cuthbert's Way (see page 44).

There isn't a guidebook but Scottish Borders Council has a colourful 59-page booklet: download it free from [www.scotborders.gov.uk/bordersabbeysway](http://www.scotborders.gov.uk/bordersabbeysway) or buy it from VisitScotland (0870 608 0404 or [bordersinfo@visitscotland.com](mailto:bordersinfo@visitscotland.com)).

**Cateran Trail**

This circular trail never takes you farther than 7 miles from a village. Thanks to Perth & Kinross Countryside Trust it has consistent 'heart of Scotland' waymarking. The scenery of rural Perthshire and Angus is attractive and the walking not unduly strenuous. Cateran derives from the Gaelic word ceathairne ('peasantry') which came to mean the Highlander cattle thieves and irregular soldiers. Parts of the trail follow ancient drove routes.

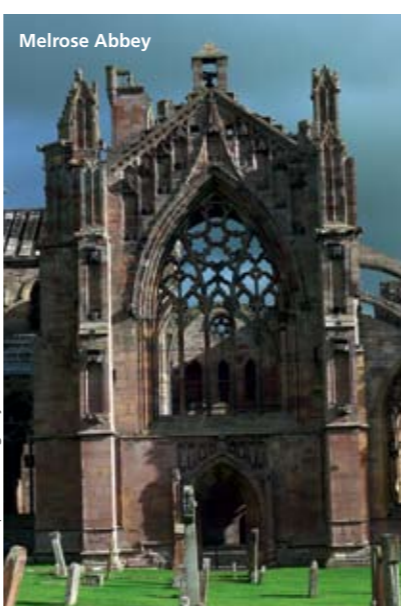
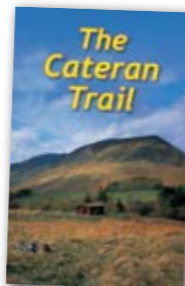


Photo: Jacquetta Megarry



Photo: Jacquetta Megarry



Photo: Kevin Howett

The trail also features earlier history and legends, and there's a side-trip up Mount Blair, which on a clear day offers one of the finest hilltop views in Scotland, for an altitude gain of only 380m. The location finder identifies 37 Munros including Ben Nevis, some 62 miles away.

The Cateran Trail: a circular walk in the heart of Scotland by Jacquetta Megarry (Rucksack Readers, 2004, £10.99)

**Cowal Way**

This route cuts across the Cowal peninsula from south-west to north-east, visiting several sea lochs on its way to Loch Lomond. Cowal is accessible by road from Glasgow, and also by ferry from Kintyre and the Isle of Bute. The route starts at Portavadie on Loch Fyne (linking with the Kintyre Way) and ends at Inveruglas on Loch Lomond (linking with the West Highland Way). It can be seen as the missing link that enables Scotland's ultimate waymarked long-distance walk, from near the Mull of Kintyre all the way to Fort William and, via the Great Glen Way, to Inverness.

The highlights of my own Cowal Way experience were



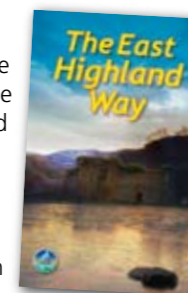
the rocky scramble alongside Loch Riddon, a close encounter with a golden eagle at Curra Lochain, the challenge of navigating from Loch Goil to Loch Long in deep snow and a white-out, and the glorious gentle hike through Glen Loin.

The Cowal Way: with Isle of Bute by Michael Kaufman and James McLuckie (Rucksack Readers, 2009, £10.99)

**East Highland Way**

Scotland's newest long-distance walk links the northern end of the West Highland Way (Fort William) to the southern end of the Speyside Way (Aviemore). It's the brainchild of Kevin Langan, a Glasgow-based hiker who developed the route, published the route details by website in December 2009 and is writing the guidebook. Accommodation exists at suitable intervals and doubtless other services will spring up as demand grows.

Spread over six or seven days, the longest day is 16.3 miles (26 km) with the rest mostly 10-13 miles. While its main highlights are the scenery and wildlife, it also features



Ardverkie House (Glenbogle of TV fame) and Loch an Eilean ruined castle. For walkers who don't require waymarking, this could become 2010's most popular new walk.

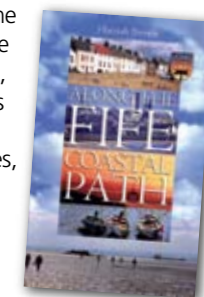
The East Highland Way: Fort William to Aviemore by Kevin Langan (Rucksack Readers, forthcoming, £10.99)

**Fife Coastal Path**

Starting from the Forth Rail Bridge near Edinburgh, this walk passes a wealth of castles, churches, harbours and monuments around the coastline of the Kingdom of Fife. It visits the charming fishing villages of the East Neuk (Elie, St Monans, Pittenweem, Anstruther and Crail) and the university city of St Andrews. After an inland loop via Leuchars, it passes through Tayport and ends at the Tay Road Bridge south of Dundee.

The 'official' website gives the distance as 93 miles (150 km) although this differs from other websites and the guidebook (which quotes 67 miles/108 km).

Along the Fife Coastal Path by Hamish Brown (Mercat/Birlinn, 2009, £12.99)



## Great Glen Way

Officially opened in 2002, this route joins Fort William, Scotland's outdoor capital, to Inverness, capital of the Highlands. It follows the Great Glen Fault and most of it is fairly low-level, though north of Invermoriston there are some stiff gradients and the final day into Inverness is a long one (18 miles/29 km).

The route's distinctive feature is the water that is your near-constant companion: not only three lovely lochs (Lochy, Oich and Ness) but also the Caledonian Canal with its flights of locks. With several hill forts, monuments to clan history and Urquhart Castle, the Great Glen Way has plenty of historic interest.

Guidebooks are available from *Rucksack Readers* (2005, £10.99, [www.rucksacs.com](http://www.rucksacs.com)) and *Cicerone Press* (2007, £12, [www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk))

## Kintyre Way

Famous as Scotland's only 'mainland island', Kintyre is both rural and remote, with deserted beaches, wild moorland and rolling hills. The Way criss-crosses Kintyre from Tarbert in

the north to Dunaverty Bay in the south, passing ruined castles at Tarbert and Skipness, Saddell Abbey and finishing just past St Columba's Chapel.

On the Atlantic coast you'll see great sunsets over Islay and Jura, and to the east are the glories of Loch Fyne and the Clyde islands, especially the mountains of Arran.

Although the Way has a distinctive logo (stylised mountains on their side) its blue waymarker posts are eccentric and some junctions are confusing. However, the Way's hard-working and effective Ranger has seen through



The old Glen Ogle Viaduct on the Rob Roy Way, also part of the Sustrans cycle route

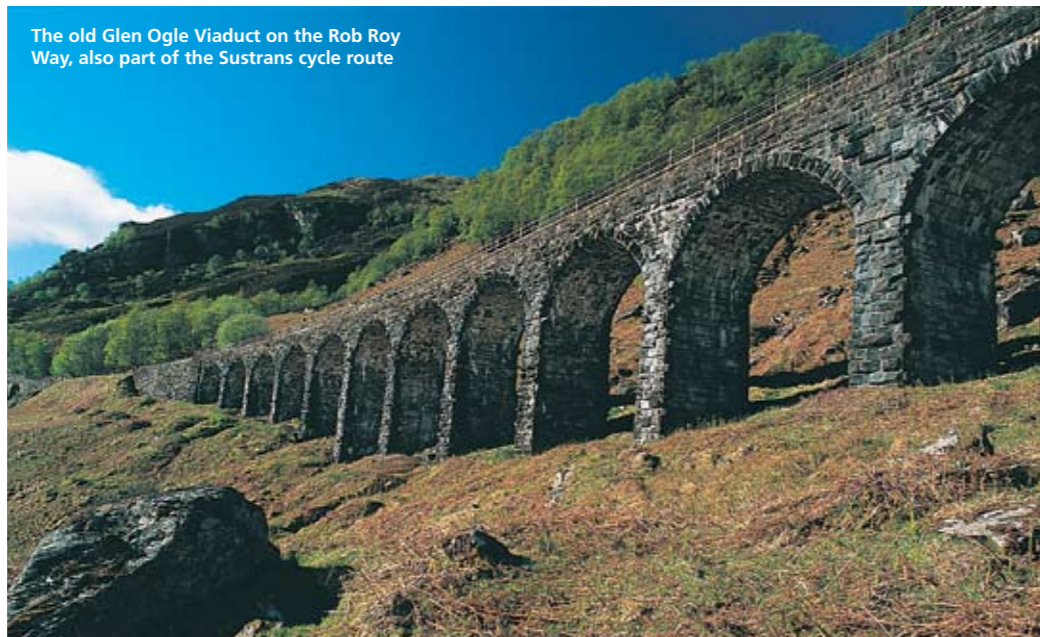


Photo: Jacquetta Megarry

many improvements, and its maintenance is better than most.

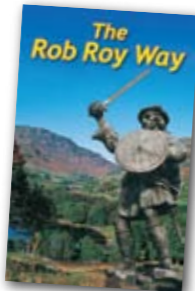
*The Kintyre Way* by Sandra Bardwell and Jacquetta Megarry (*Rucksack Readers*, 2007, £10.99)

## Rob Roy Way

The Rob Roy Way features superb views over hills and glens, rather like the West Highland Way but without the crowds, so you see more wildlife. You pass some of Scotland's most tranquil lochs, and side-trips include Ben Ledi, Ben Vorlich and Stuc a' Chroin.

The links with Rob Roy MacGregor are strong, especially from Drymen to Killin, and the signs of Jacobite history and clan activities are everywhere. At the outset you pass the aqueducts and domed shafts of the Loch Katrine water scheme. The railway heritage is obvious while you walk along trackbeds and pass over the glorious Glenogle viaduct.

You visit secret lochans, rivers and rapids and the final stage, over the hills from Strathtay village, offers superb views back over Loch Tay to Ben Lawers, past a Neolithic stone circle, down to the heart of Pitlochry.



*The Rob Roy Way: from Drymen to Pitlochry* by Jacquetta Megarry (*Rucksack Readers*, 2006, £10.99)

## St Cuthbert's Way

Starting from Melrose Abbey, in the Scottish Borders, this easygoing route takes you past castles, hill forts and ruined abbeys. The route winds alongside the River Tweed and includes a section of ancient Roman road. After its summit on Wideopen Hill (368m/1207ft), you cross the border into England. After Wooler and Fenwick comes the barefoot finale of the Pilgrims' Path over tidal sands to the Holy Island of Lindisfarne.

Guidebooks are available from *Mercat/Birlinn* (2009, £12.99, [www.birlinn.co.uk](http://www.birlinn.co.uk)) and *Rucksack Readers* (2010, £10.99, [www.rucksacs.com](http://www.rucksacs.com))

## Southern Upland Way

This is Scotland's coast to coast and at 212 miles, it's even longer than its more famous Wainwright cousin. It runs from Portpatrick, near Stranraer, north-westerly to Cockburnspath

on the North Sea, south of Dunbar. It can be split at Moffat, as a rough midpoint, and is waymarked throughout as an LDR. However, in low cloud or hill fog, navigational competence is necessary.

The SUW is a challenging two-week walk however you approach it. Spread over 13 days, there are four 20+-mile days, unavoidable unless you're wild camping or can arrange lifts with B&B providers. Because it cuts across the lie of the land, you face a huge altitude gain even though its highest point is at a mere 720m (2360 ft) on the Lowther Hills.

However, it does sample all the landscapes of southern Scotland, from coastal cliffs to high moorland and rolling hills, from mountains and forests to lochs and glens, and it's full of archaeological and historic interest.

Guidebooks are available from *Cicerone* (2007, £12.00, [www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)) and *Mercat/Birlinn* (2005, £16.99, [www.birlinn.co.uk](http://www.birlinn.co.uk))

## Speyside Way

The walk begins at Buckie, on the Moray Firth coast; then from nearby Spey Bay you follow the



Photo: Jacquetta Megarry

Loch Lomond from Cnap Mòr with the West Highland Way snaking through the glen



Photo: Jacquetta Megarry

Spey valley south-westerly towards Aviemore, through an area rich in railway heritage as well as the famous Speyside distilleries.

The walk is punctuated by splendid villages such as Craigellachie with its Telford bridge and cooperage centre, Aberlour (with the Speyside Way Visitor Centre) and 18th century planned town of Grantown-on-Spey. Wildlife sightings can include capercaillie, reindeer and osprey.

An extension south-west to Newtonmore, mooted for several years, is now with the Cairngorms National Park Authority. However my impression is that it would be faster to follow the East Highland Way than to await the outcome!

*The Speyside Way* by Jacquetta Megarry and Jim Strachan (*Rucksack Readers*, 2007, £10.99)

## West Highland Way

Scotland's first, and still most famous, walk, it's the one that everybody has heard of and some people do repeatedly, even annually. From Glasgow it passes through Scotland's first National Park beside Loch

Lomond, then Glen Falloch and Strath Fillan toward Rannoch Moor. It rises out of Glen Coe over the Devil's Staircase, crosses the Lairigmor and Nevis Forest to Fort William, where many hikers celebrate their completion by climbing the Ben.

Waymarking is very good and its popularity has grown and grown. If you want B&B accommodation in May or June you need to book months, even years ahead. But cunning choice of departure date lets you dodge the crowds and in winter, this route offers a real wilderness experience in places.

Guidebooks are available from *Cicerone* (2003, £10, [www.cicerone.co.uk](http://www.cicerone.co.uk)), *Mercat/Birlinn* (April 2010, £16.99, [www.birlinn.co.uk](http://www.birlinn.co.uk)), *Rucksack Readers* (2008, £10.99, [www.rucksacs.com](http://www.rucksacs.com)), *Trailblazer* (2008, £9.99, [www.trailblazer-guides.com](http://www.trailblazer-guides.com))



The Old Drover's Inn at Inverarnan on Loch Lomond



Photo: Jacquetta Megarry

## More information and maps

UK Trailwalker's Handbook (*Cicerone/LDWA* 2009 £18.95, but £12.95 to LDWA members): eighth edition of this comprehensive UK directory

There's a generally useful website at [http://walking.visitscotland.com/walks/long\\_distance\\_routes](http://walking.visitscotland.com/walks/long_distance_routes)

Footprint route maps exist for the Fife Coastal Path, Great Glen Way, Speyside Way and West Highland Way (£4.95 each, [www.stirlingsurveys.co.uk](http://www.stirlingsurveys.co.uk))

Harvey Maps exist for the Great Glen Way, St Cuthbert's Way, Speyside Way and West Highland Way (£11.95 each, except St Cuthbert's Way £6.95 special offer, [www.harveymaps.co.uk](http://www.harveymaps.co.uk))

Some long-distance walks (and all LDRs) are marked on OS maps (*Discovery* and *Explorer* series) but these are not always reliable, even on the most up-to-date edition. Most routes require many sheets for total coverage, so this option can turn out surprisingly expensive.

Jacquetta Megarry founded *Rucksack Readers*, publisher of guidebooks for long-distance walks in the British Isles and worldwide, and for climbers of the seven summits (see [www.rucksacs.com](http://www.rucksacs.com)) and is based near Dunblane.