



## The wild Highlands

Caledonian Canal - Corpach to Gairloch

It's wild, it's woolly and it's non-negotiably wonderful. Between the crunching of your boots on the towpath, you can (if you try hard enough) hear the cries of clans and squeals of mournful bagpipes swirling the peaks of this highland landscape. The water keeps you looking ahead but the Highlands play with your mind: a fickle sweep of light can turn joyous mountains into a dark looming menace - then in another single puff of weather let you breathe again.

Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain, looks down over the outskirts of Fort William; and as you trundle away from town, following the edge of Loch Linnhe, you reach Corpach Basin at the start of the Caledonian Canal. Here, the life of the water takes its grip and digs goose bumps out of your skin. Anywhere you've ever walked before, or are yet to walk, blanks from your mind as this place wills you to stand still for a while, trapped in one moment. A giant double lock marks the start of the canal and the Highlands call. Pull on a pom-pom hat and prepare for high air; but don't worry if you're not an experienced walker because even though this towpath leads you into real hiking territory, this is an easy walk. You can meet all sorts of walkers on the Caledonian towpath, and everyone's got one thing in common – so don't even think of passing another walker

without saying good morning and meaning it.

The first flight of locks is dependably spectacular. Neptune's Staircase doesn't even pretend to be as modest as those on narrow canals south of the borders. Huge chambers and lock gates carry boats up into the Highlands with every fluid ounce of drama you'd expect.

Before the canal was built, boats had to navigate the ferocious sea of the north coast to travel from the west side of Scotland to the east, and there were no roads to make a highland passage any easier either. The Great Glen and its lochs and rivers gave Thomas Telford, a Scotsman, the starting point for his radical project of building Scotland's coast to coast canal in the Highlands.

The canal opened in 1822 during the time of the Highland clearances. Crofters were forced to abandon their farms, migrating to towns, less fertile land or emigrating to America. Highland history is fiery and politically contentious, blighted by famine, cholera, the banning of wearing tartan kilts and restrictions on drinking whisky. The Caledonian Canal brought employment during troubled times of poverty and disruption. It was built by navvies whose blood was notoriously fuelled on whisky and whose labour leaves its legacy virtually untouched by progress today for tourists, boaters and walkers to respect.

Holly, gorse, birch, fern and heather remind you the walk isn't only about the canal and the show-grabbing mountains. The smell of pine trees and bright red berries of Rowan trees vie sweetly for attention. The deeper you venture into the Highlands, the more your route erases distant disturbance in your subconscious of the madness of urban chaos and noisy cars. The Caledonian talks to you with its own convincing spirit and leaves you with a wild inner peace that lurks within until you can come back again. Glossy travel writers will say the Andes, Bernese Oberland, Bondi Beach are sublime destinations; walkers on the Caledonian Canal know another.





### Highlight of the walk

The men who built the flight in the early 1800s gave the flight its name, Neptune, after the Roman God of the sea. If your timing is lucky, you might catch the morning or matinée performance of boats travelling through the locks with waterfalls thundering over lock gates as they fill and empty in rhythmic logic.

### Did you know?

The law is different in Scotland from the rest of the UK - wild camping is permitted along the Caledonian, so long as you are of course responsible, leaving no trace.

### Fascinating fact

Nature built the Great Glen around 400 million years ago when two land masses crashed together, causing mountains to erupt, giving the highlands and lowlands their relationship. It's Scotland's longest glen, over 60 miles linking west & east coasts. The Caledonian Canal was built in the 19th century to enable boats to avoid the risky sea journey around the north of Scotland, and the 77-mile Great Glen Way long-distance trail opened in 2002.

[www.greatglenway.com](http://www.greatglenway.com)



**Start:**

Corpach  
OS Grid ref: NN095766

**Finish:**

Gairloch  
OS Grid ref: NN176842

**Distance:**

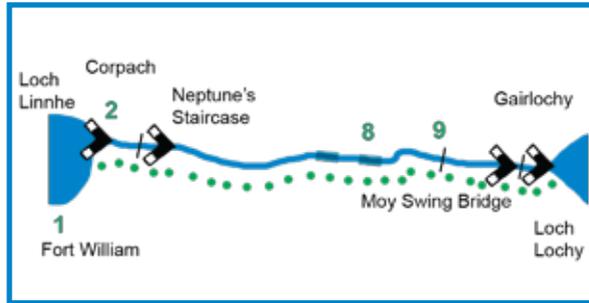
8 miles (11 from Fort W)

**Terrain:**

Flat easy walking. Good surface.

**OS Explorer Map**

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## The walk - step by step

1. The official Great Glen Way starts in Fort William, 3 miles from the start of the canal, and takes you round the bay of Loch Linnhe to Corpach.
2. Our walk begins once you reach the spectacular basin at Corpach. The sea lock opens out to Loch Linnhe, and the backdrop of Ben Nevis is stunning.
3. After exploring the basin and British Waterways Scotland office, follow the towpath to the right of Double Lock.
4. There are glimpses of the houses of Caol to your right, but the view ahead is just greenery and mountains.
5. After just under a mile, you'll see the infamous Neptune's Staircase, a flight of locks heading uphill in front of you. Take care across the level crossing then over the road to reach the locks.
6. Allow some time to walk up the lock flight. There is so much to look at: the cavernous lock chambers, black and

white paintwork, old capstans, information boards, a tearoom and shop, a hotel pub, not to mention the thrill of watching a boat helped through the locks by the keepers.

7. Once you tear yourself away from the bustle of the Staircase and past the large mooring area above, you are immediately surrounded by stunning Highland scenery of trees, hills, sheep and dramatic mountains.

8. After a sign to Shengain Aqueduct, then a pretty white cottage, you reach Loy sluices and Glen Loy Aqueduct, the biggest of four along this stretch. A 'Great Glen Ways' display board explains the importance of the area.

9. A mile or so further on, Moy Swing Bridge and cottage come into view. There are great views over the river Lochy to the Ben Nevis range on your right along the next mile or so.

10. The walk ends where the canal meets Loch Lochy at the locks and swing bridge at Gairloch.

## Where to eat

**Moorings Hotel**

Banavie. Canalside by Neptune's Staircase. Dog-friendly. T:01397 772797  
www.moorings-fortwilliam.co.uk

**Telford Tearoom**

Gairloch. Canalside between Top Lock and Loch Lochy. The former lock-keeper's house dates from the time the first lock was built (the second was added in 1844 after major floods), and Telford used to stay here during his visits to the canal. T:01397 713900

**Best picnic spot**

Between bridges 29 and 30.

**And more**

Large choice of other pubs and cafés in Fort William, Corpach and Banavie.

## Canoeing

Canoeing is extremely popular along the Caledonian Canal and the Great Glen Canoe Trail, Scotland's first official canoe trail, was launched in 2012.

Their website provides information about the trail, and also lists operators who hire out canoes or kayaks.

www.greatglencanoetrail.info

**Moy Bridge**

The only remaining original cast-iron swing bridge on the Caledonian Canal.

Designed by Thomas Telford, each half is opened and closed by hand from its own side of the canal - so after opening the bridge on the towpath side, the bridge keeper then has to row across the canal to open the other half.

## Where to stay

**Canalside B&Bs****Dalcomera**

Gairloch. Riverside, a short walk from the canal. T:01397 712778  
www.dalcomera.co.uk

**Canalside campsites****Lochy Holiday Park**

Fort William. Short walk from Neptune's Staircase. Self-catering also available. T:01397 703446  
www.lochey-holiday-park.co.uk

**Gairloch Holiday Park** 4-star Gairloch. Short walk from the canal. T:01397 712711  
www.theghp.co.uk

**Canalside cottages**

**Highland Lodges** 3-star South Laggan. By Loch Lochy. Dog-friendly. T:07855 653491  
www.highlandlodges.org.uk

**Canalside Apartments** 5-star Banavie. Next to Neptune's Staircase. Wheelchair access. Dog-friendly. T:07786 966245  
highlandholidayapartments.co.uk

**Seangan Croft Lodges & Cottages**

3-star. Muirshearlich. Canalside. Dog-friendly. T:0141 5890014  
www.seangan.co.uk

**Canalside hotels**

**Moorings Hotel** 3-star Banavie. Next to Neptune's Staircase. Dog-friendly. T:01397 772797  
www.moorings-fortwilliam.co.uk

**And more**

Good choice of self-catering, B&Bs and hotels in & near Fort William, Banavie & Gairloch. www.visithighlands.com



## How to get there

### Train info

Corpach, Banavie, Fort William & Spean Bridge  
[www.scotrail.co.uk](http://www.scotrail.co.uk)

National Rail Enquiries T:08457 484950

### Bus info

Traveline Scotland T:0871 2002233

### Parking

Roadside or various car parks to choose from

## Local Tourist info

### Information Centre Fort William

T:0845 2255121 [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com)

### Great Glen Way

[www.greatglenway.com](http://www.greatglenway.com)

### Scottish Canals

For more information about the Caledonian Canal. [www.scottishcanals.co.uk](http://www.scottishcanals.co.uk)

### Clan Cameron Museum

On the banks of Loch Lochy, 2 miles beyond Gairloch. Explore the history of the clan with artefacts, displays and clan records.

T:01397 712480 [www.clan-cameron.org](http://www.clan-cameron.org)

### West Highland steam train

'The Jacobite' runs from Fort William to Mallaig (it crosses the canal at the foot of Neptune's Staircase), following the route of Hogwarts Express in the Harry Potter films.

T:0844 8504685 [www.steamtrain.info](http://www.steamtrain.info)

## Boats

### Caledonian Discovery Limited

Corpach. 'Fingal of Caledonia' is a converted holiday barge.

T:01397 772167 [www.fingal-cruising.co.uk](http://www.fingal-cruising.co.uk)

### European Waterways

'Scottish Highlander' is a luxury hotel barge.

T:01753 598555 [www.gobarging.com](http://www.gobarging.com)

### West Highland Sailing / LeBoat

Laggan Locks. Holiday boat hire.

T:01809 501234 [www.westhighlandsailing.com](http://www.westhighlandsailing.com)

T:02392 224252 [www.leboat.co.uk](http://www.leboat.co.uk)

### Caley Cruisers

Inverness. Holiday boat hire.

T:01463 236328 [www.caleycruisers.com](http://www.caleycruisers.com)

