

Get away for... THE WEEKEND!

Wester Ross is a walking paradise and you may even see the northern lights, too!

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Swaddled in multiple layers of clothing and gazing up at a star-filled sky, I remembered that it all started with the northern lights. Browsing social media, it seemed that everyone except me had seen this colourful natural light display. While some had travelled abroad to catch a glimpse, others smugly posted photographs from Scotland of the 'mirrie dancers', as they call them.

One of my friends had told me confidently that the northern lights (aurora borealis) were more active around the spring and autumn equinox. I wanted to believe him and so allowed this tiny and somewhat dubious fact to fester in the part of my brain reserved for planning campervan trips.

I was soon persuading my partner, Anthony, that we could fit in a trip to the north of Scotland around the spring

equinox. I argued that, at least, we would have a few days of chilly walking in our favourite country. Although we live in the north of England, northern Scotland is still a long drive, but we can reach Inverness comfortably in a day.

At Ardtower Caravan Park, we settled onto our pitch in time to watch the sun set over the Moray Firth. Geese in the neighbouring field took off, joining other skeins and creating an unruly and noisy flock across the Firth.

The spectacular natural light show of the aurora occurs near the poles where the Earth's magnetic field is weaker. The result of collisions between gaseous particles in the atmosphere and charged particles driven by the sun's solar winds, green is the most common colour of auroral displays.

To see these dancing lights, a clear ➤

Why?... To enjoy great solitary walking among or up stunning mountains, dark skies filled with stars and the chance to see the 'mirrie dancers'!



MAIN Beinn Eige reflected in Loch Coulin

FAR LEFT The village of Torridon is strung out along the shore

BELOW LEFT Evening light in the woodland above Torridon House

BELOW RIGHT Cheery yellow gorse flowers



US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their hobbies of walking and cycling while exploring the historical and natural environments



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master MWB 2.3-litre. This is our third blue campervan. We have called them all the 'Blue Bus'

night, little light pollution, an unobstructed view to the north and a lot of luck are needed. Aurora forecasting websites are useful, giving a Kp-index to indicate the intensity of geomagnetic storms and information on where you might see the northern lights. Everything except a favourable Kp-index was in place. So, with no expectations and weary after driving, we were happy to just watch the stars.

The next morning we were up early with the sunshine and the returning geese. Although we were keen to get to our destination in Torridon in the northwestern Highlands, it was such a glorious morning we were distracted by the views and stopped to take pictures. I am sure you, too, will pull into the Glen Docherty car park for that classic photograph showing the road snaking down to Loch Maree.

At Loch Clair, we parked in a layby and set off walking. Torridon is paradise for hillwalkers, with a stunning selection of Munros (Scottish mountains over 3,000ft). It also has low-level walks for those, like us, not equipped for winter mountaineering.

The walk around Loch Clair and Loch Coulbin is a classic Highlands walk of 5½ miles. On a sunny day the two lochs are dazzling, with views to two of Torridon's spectacular mountains – the steep snow-

clad slopes of Liathach (difficult to pronounce, but try ignoring the th and being guttural) and the massive Beinn Eighe (pronounced 'ay').

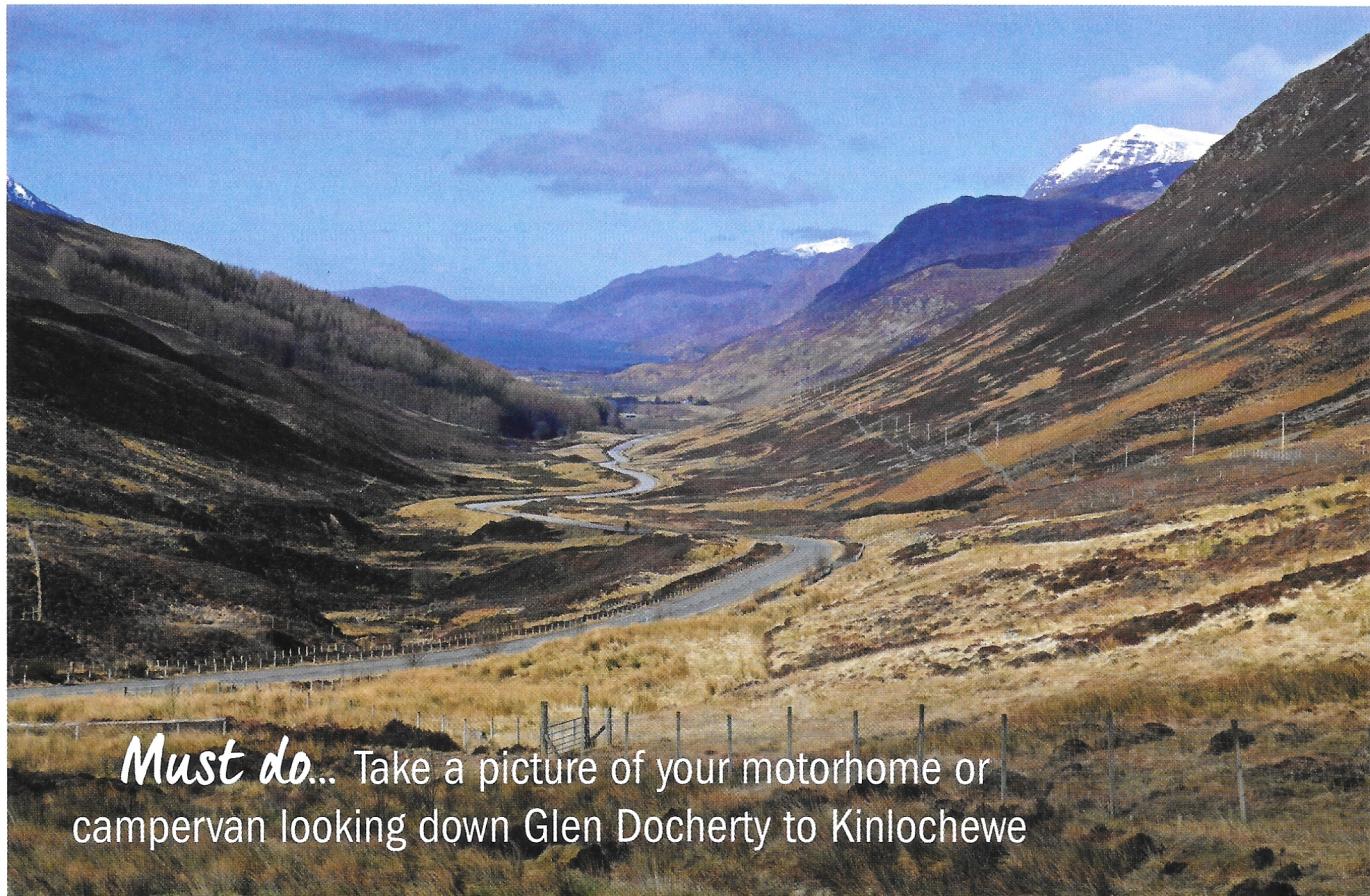
Beinn Eighe has many peaks and ridges; seeing it as one mountain is deceptive. It has two Munros and, hidden behind its mass, is a spectacular corrie with a glacial lake and steep-sculpted buttresses.

Liathach is a different beast, considered by many mountaineers to be Scotland's finest mountain. The traverse of its ridge is a memorable expedition.

Anthony had a faraway look in his eyes as he remembered his youthful ascent and the tricky scrambling over and around the ridge's pinnacles called Am Fasarinen (The Teeth). The yellow gorse was just coming into flower and groups of stately Scots pine trees shaded the loch where goldeneye and little grebe bobbed quietly.

Walking through slender birch trees, we spotted coal tits and, above, a golden eagle soared. Returning along the shore of Loch Coulbin, the snowy slopes of Beinn Eighe were picturesquely reflected in the water.

Despite the fantastic weather we only met one other couple and we sat in happy solitude, not wanting to leave. Checking the map, we shared our knowledge of Scottish Gaelic place names and their meanings.



Must do... Take a picture of your motorhome or campervan looking down Glen Docherty to Kinlochewe

Visiting Scotland over 40 years, I have connected with the language through the names for mountains and streams and grappled with the pronunciation, picking up a few basics. Translating these often-descriptive names can be worthwhile.

Beyond loch (lake) and ben or beinn (hill), I am familiar with bealach (pass), allt (stream) and abhainn (river) and I know that 'eas' marks a waterfall. Recognising that 'mòr' is big and 'beag' is little can help with route-finding. We found plenty of descriptive names on Beinn Eighe alone, including Sgurr Ban (fair-coloured craggy peak) and Creag Dhubh (black cliff).

After lunch we left the 'van at the site in Kinlochewe and headed off on another of Torridon's excellent low-level walks to the opposite shore of Loch Maree and a lonely glen. This is the approach route for Slioch (spear), the imposing castle-like mountain that soars over Loch Maree.

It is around three miles to the loch, passing an old cemetery and following the gravelly river, its banks lined with lichen-dripping gnarled native trees. In this enchanted woodland we startled a red deer and it bounced away, so light on its feet that it seemed to float.

A herd of feral goats live here and I blame the limping goat for distracting us from the

obvious path that follows the deep gash of Gleann Bhanasdale into remote country. Heading uphill towards the snowy slopes of Slioch, we eventually realised our mistake and slithered down the heather-clad hillside to the delightful riverside path.

Successive waterfalls pepper the glen and Scots pine cling to the steep sides of rocky gorges. In the distance we spotted small herds of red deer. We didn't meet another hiker but, back near the bridge, a group of long-haired goats, including a cute kid, casually munched their way up the slopes.

It was dusk when we returned to the 'van. The skies are dark in Kinlochewe and, had the Kp-index been higher, we would surely have seen the northern lights as we had yet another cloudless evening.

Wrapped against the cold, we sat looking north. Orion hung over the 'van in a star-filled sky and we could see the Plough and Cassiopeia and felt part of something bigger.

The mirrie dancers didn't put in an appearance. It turns out that science suggests it is mere speculation that the spring and autumn equinoxes bring greater solar activity. My friend was misinformed.

In truth, we were too late or too early; the aurora is at its zenith when solar activity is at its highest, known as the Solar Maximum and part of an 11-year cycle. The last Solar >

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG

Three nights

WHEN

We visited in March

HOW MUCH

Fuel Average 34mpg

(763 miles) £117

Site fees £68

TOTAL £185



TOP TIPS

For more ideas for walks in Torridon – and the rest of Scotland

 walkhighlands.co.uk

For some inspiring photographs of Torridon, check out this local photographer

 stevecarter.com

BELOW RIGHT To call the bulk of Beinn Eighe one mountain is misleading

BELOW LEFT Wild goats in Gleann Bhanasdale

INFORMATION

Around the sea lochs of Torridon and Shieldaig and inland to Kinlochewe

 visitotorridon.co.uk

West of Ross (obviously), it's mainly the western half of the county of Ross and Cromarty

 visitwester-ross.com

For information about Beinn Eighe Nature Reserve

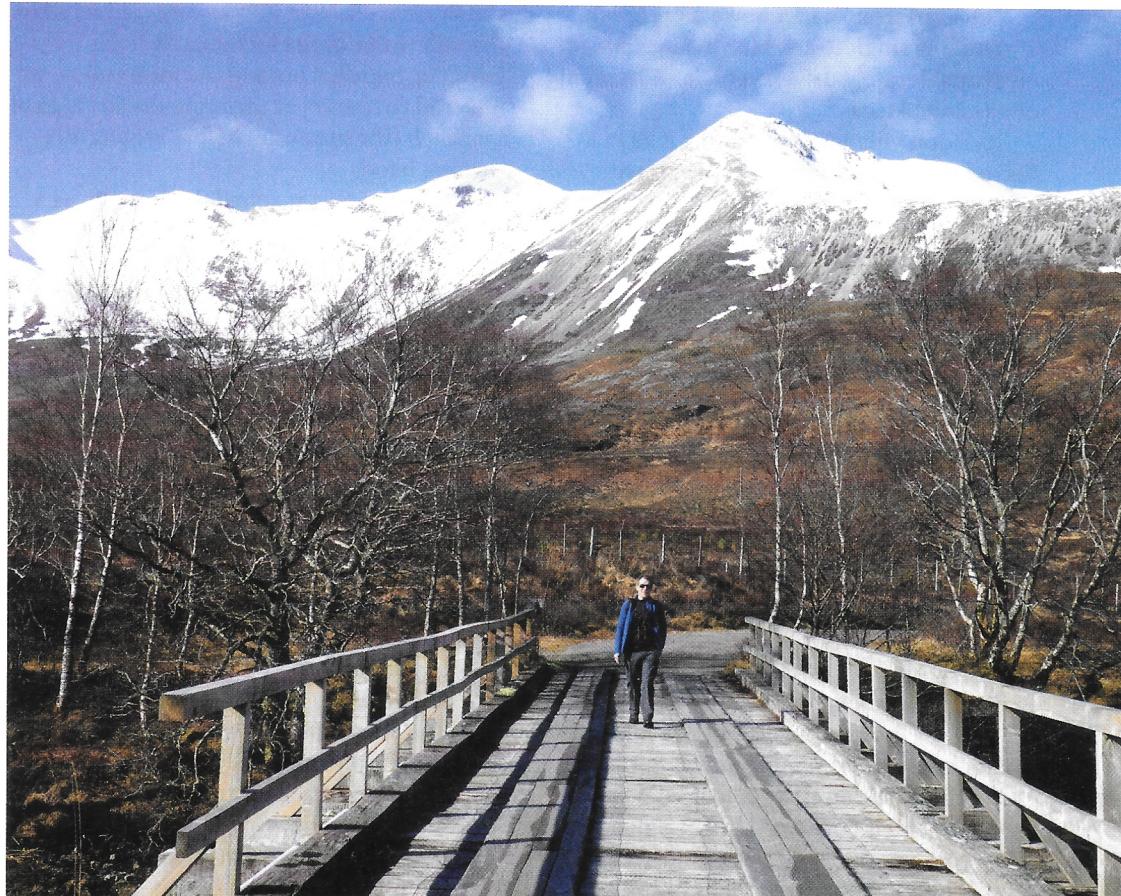
 nature.scot

A collection of Gaelic place names, including their locations, translations, photographs and stories

 torridonplace-names.org.uk

Sign up for aurora alerts

 aurorawatch.lancs.ac.uk





Must see... The view across Loch Clair to the impressive peaks of Liathach and Beinn Eighe

Maximum was June 2014, so we will return in 2025!

The road from Kinlochewe along Glen Torridon is single-track but manageable for any considerably driven vehicle, with plenty of passing places.

Torridon village strings along a bay dotted with yellow gorse and we drove through to stop in the small car park above Torridon House.

We picked up an amazing trail that emerges from lush woodland onto a sandy and rocky path climbing steadily upwards, taking us deep into backcountry.

This is a perfect route for late winter if you want to experience the seclusion of a wild place without having to tackle snow and ice.

A rock-cut river gorge accompanies the early stretch of the path and a tributary cascaded down the rocks in a shimmering waterfall. To our left loomed the three pinnacles of Torridon's third big mountain, Beinn Alligin, the jewelled mountain. Beinn Eighe and its snowy peak, Sail Mhor (the great heel), dominated our view, a giant monochrome pyramid of snow and rock.

We didn't see another soul, had no phone signal and I felt embraced by the splendour and isolation. Our only companion was a dipper, bobbing between rocks in the

shallow tumbling river.

The clouds dispersed and, in the sunshine, the wintry peaks were reflected in the still water of the lochans. At Loch Grobaig, huddled among the mountains, we lingered to marvel at the crenellated ridge of Liathach (the grey one) before reluctantly turning back.

By the time we reached the 'van it was a glorious evening and, wanting to hang onto the feeling of euphoria, we drove up to the viewpoint beyond Annat. The panorama over Upper Loch Torridon and across to Beinn Alligin and Liathach would sustain me on the drive home.

Fort George, the impressive eighteenth century fort near Inverness, was a perfect stop to stretch our legs on the drive south. We didn't go in but explored the ramparts and dry moat and, on the shoreline, looked across the misty Moray Firth for dolphins.

There is no doubt we will be back to northern Scotland. Maybe next time we will be lucky to catch a glimpse of the illusive aurora borealis.

Torridon still stands as the best walking area in Scotland and, going out of season, we felt we almost had it to ourselves.

I returned home reinvigorated and with a few more words of Scots Gaelic under my belt. Sláinte!

ABOVE The track by Loch Clair is a stunning low-level walk

THE CAMPSITES

Ardtower Caravan Park,
Culloden Road, Inverness
IV2 5AA

01463 790555
ardtower-caravan-park.com

1 February - 4 January
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £25

Kinlochewe Caravan and Motorhome Club Site,
Kinlochewe IV22 2PA

01445 760239
camc.com
19 March - 1 November
£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £22.90