

Bucket list Scotland

Whether you rise to the challenge of big Ben Nevis or reach your peak on modest hills, the splendour of the scenery will leave you on a high

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Carol Kubicki





I don't have a bucket list. If I did, then climbing Ben Nevis would have been on it. Reaching the top of the UK's highest mountain, I felt not only exhausted but also strangely emotional. Anthony sat alongside me as I gazed in awe across the craggy and menacing northern corries still draped in snow and brought me back down to earth by trying on a pair of red plastic sunglasses he had 'rescued' on the path.

It was a perfect day, not least because the sun shone in a blue sky. In such conditions, I couldn't expect to have the Ben's summit to myself. Nearby, a young Polish man was excitedly phoning his mum and other walkers were taking photographs and picnicking, but the spacious plateau didn't feel crowded.

Determined to remember my day on this magnificent bulky mountain, I circumnavigated the top, trying to absorb the views at each compass point. Away from the edge I came to the remains of the meteorological observatory. From here, weather data was provided in all seasons around the turn of the nineteenth century. A tiny snow bunting flitting among the stones, unnoticed by most of the throng, made me stop and focus on something so small among so much grandeur.

We were lucky to wake to sunshine for pretty much all of the 10 days we were around Glencoe and Fort William. With temperatures in the glens around 25°C, there would never be a better time to climb Ben Nevis. We packed our rucksacks with a flask, three bottles of water, enough food for an Everest expedition, spare clothing, a map, compass and first aid kit and headed up.

Anthony was expedition leader and dragged me away from the summit after an hour; he knew the descent would also be long and tiring. Ben Nevis is 4,413ft high and, even taking the so-called tourist path, it is a long day, starting near sea level and ➤

THE JOURNEY

We travelled from our home in Morecambe to Fort William via the M6, M74 and Callander and Crianlarich, returning the same way. We spent 10 days touring with eight nights on campsites and one night wild camping in May

THE COSTS

Fuel Average 34mpg.....	£98
Site fees.....	£176
Attractions Two adults: Glenloy Wildlife pine marten evening.....	£40
Bus fares Two adults: Kinlochleven-Glencoe village.....	£4.80
Total costs.....	£318.80

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 and we have called them all the Blue Bus

LEFT There is nothing to get in the way of the views from the Pap of Glencoe

BETWEEN Taking a break on the steep path up the Pap of Glencoe

620 miles



INFORMATION

A fantastic resource of over 2,000 walks from short low-level ambles to big mountains

 walkhighlands.co.uk

For information about the National Cycle Network

 sustrans.org.uk

with over 10 miles to cover. Although some people will run up and down in less than four hours, most take much longer.

I enjoy the solitude of the mountains but, on Ben Nevis, I embraced a uniquely sociable hiking experience.

We met different nationalities, ages and shapes on the well-made path and the sunshine inspired a sense of camaraderie as fitter hikers encouraged those who were finding it hard going.

A Dutch walking group we had met on another hill, a few days previously, greeted us like old friends and we kept passing an elderly couple from South Africa. The woman was sprightly and rushing ahead, but was worried about her partner, who was taking his time. "She runs on fresh air," he told us.

After over nine hours of walking, I felt completely deserving of the meal in the Glen Nevis campsite restaurant that evening. I was glowing from the sun (and

pride) and really wanted a t-shirt proclaiming to all that 'I have really earned this pudding'.

We had started our trip in the tranquillity of Glen Orchy after a night wild camping. From the Eas Urchaidh rapids we then walked through Caledonian pine forest to the summit of Beinn Mhic-Mhonaidh, a 2,611ft Corbett.

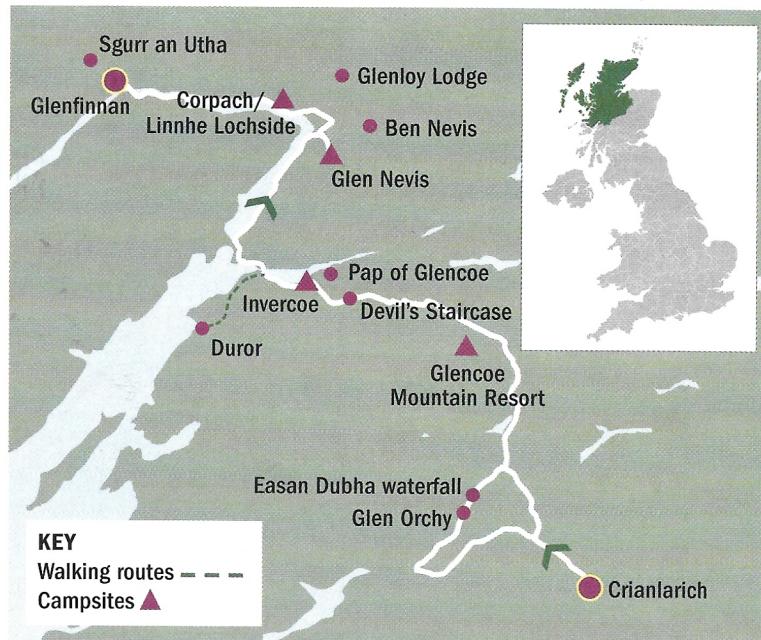
Scotland has plenty of mountains to tick off a bucket list: the 282 Munros are the highest at over 3,000ft. Next are the 222 Corbets of 2,500-3,000ft, sometimes more challenging than a Munro and just as enjoyable. The 219 Grahams are 2,000-2,500ft high.

Forestry workers were clearfelling the plantations in Glen Orchy as we set off walking and we were pleased to see the rows of spruce being partly replaced with wildlife-friendly mixed woodland. These were the last people we saw.

We emerged from woodland tracks onto

"The hummocky and stony summit of Beinn Mhic-Mhonaidh was surprisingly lovely with pools, a cairn and stunning 360-degree view"





grassy slopes; the hummocky and stony summit of Beinn Mhic-Mhonaidh was surprisingly lovely with pools, a cairn and stunning 360-degree view.

Bigger mountains surrounded us, many still dusted with fresh snow.

Although we don't expect wall-to-wall sunshine in Scotland, the hail shower as we arrived at Glencoe Mountain Resort was a surprise. Soggy West Highland Way backpackers were warming up in the café, sharing their hiking stories.

Later, when the weather cleared, we strolled down the road to the Kingshouse Hotel for a drink in the welcoming bar. The sun was setting behind the distinctive Buachaille Etive Mòr – the craggy pyramidal mountain that features in so many photographs – as we walked back.

Another thing that would have been on my bucket list (if it existed), is Glencoe's Devil's Staircase. In the eighteenth century this route over the mountains was considered the best way to get north and soldiers trudging up and down the steep slope gave it the colourful name.

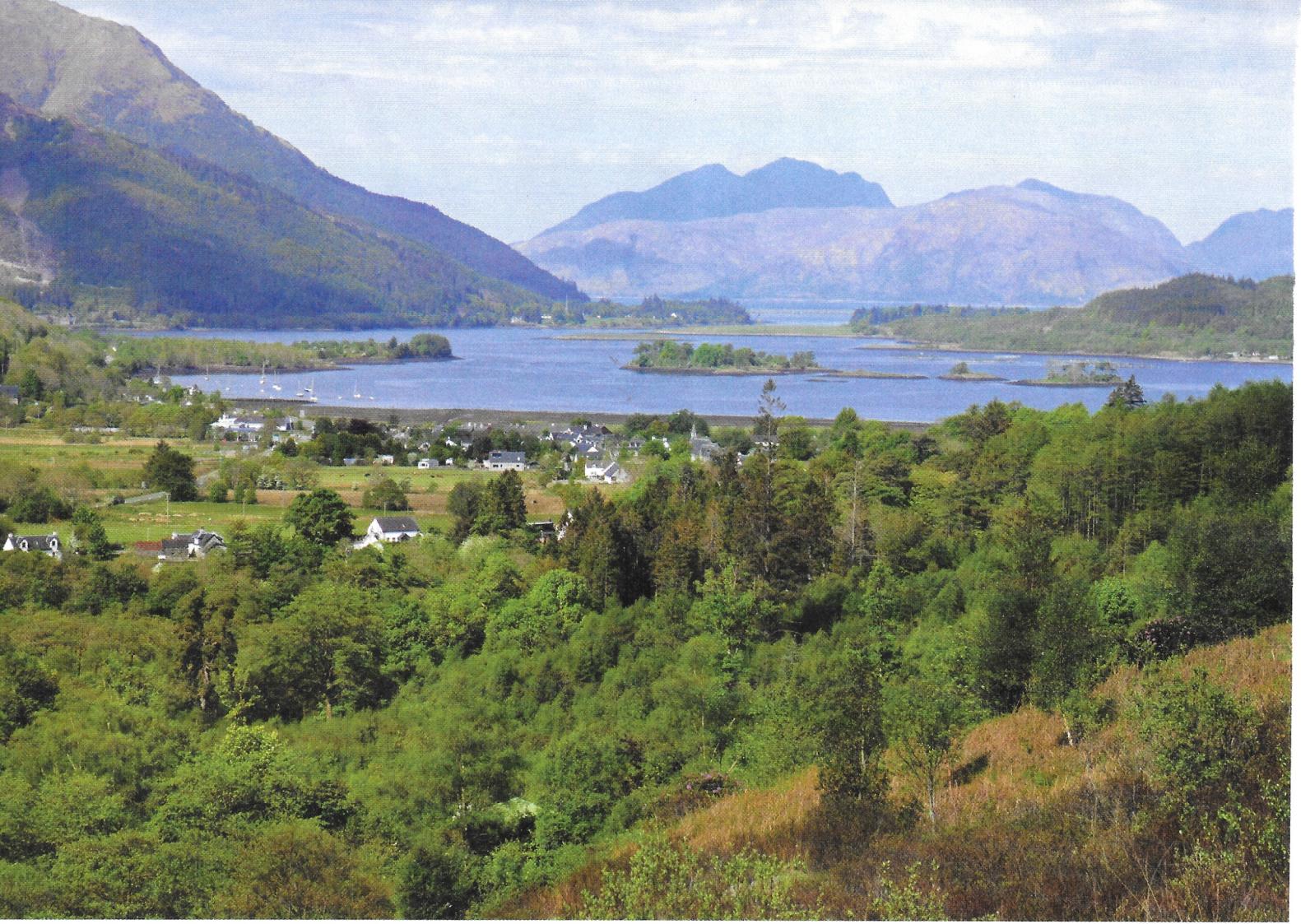
Early twentieth century labourers building the remote Blackwater Dam above Kinlochleven for the aluminium works continued the use of this name. They would rush down the precipitous path each payday for a drink at the Kingshouse, the nearest pub, and stagger back after a tipple or two.

A series of spectacular zig-zags, the Devil's Staircase is on the Kingshouse to Kinlochleven section of the West Highland Way long-distance trail. We set off along the old military road towards the splendour of Glen Coe in sunshine, looking forward to

just over 10 miles of stunning walking. If you prefer a shorter walk, then there is parking at the bottom of the staircase at Altnafeadh on the A82.

Climbing the staircase is a superb hike and, at its summit, everyone gasps as the views open out across isolated glens and rugged mountains, with Ben Nevis in the distance. We enjoyed our flask of coffee here before leaving the crowds and continuing on the broad path that gradually descends to Kinlochleven, with the long ribbon of Blackwater Reservoir to our right and the narrow Aonach Eagach ridge to our left. Near Kinlochleven we joined the six impressive parallel pipes, almost 40 inches ▶





in diameter, built to carry the water downhill from Blackwater Reservoir to the aluminium plant's hydroelectric scheme.

As we arrived in Kinlochleven to catch the bus to Glencoe village, we were joined by a fellow Lancastrian who had walked from Fort William.

She told us that she'd never done anything but "slob on the sofa" until a serious illness nudged her to get moving. She was justifiably proud of how she had got fit and told us about her targets, "I've walked 10 miles through the mountains today. Maybe Ben Nevis will be next."

We moved the Blue Bus to a campsite near Glencoe village. Above us was the distinctive cone-shaped summit of the pap of Glencoe (Sgurr na Ciche).

Looking like a child's drawing of a mountain, I was surprised to discover this isn't a Munro, or even a Corbett; at 2,343ft, the pap is a Graham.

In continuing sunshine, we took our time on the steep slopes of the Pap, enjoying the breathtaking views over Glencoe and along Loch Leven strung out below us.

The summit caught the breeze and we found a sheltered spot for a peaceful lunch. The quiet ended when we were joined by 16 chatty Dutch people who regaled us with

TOP TIPS

Glenloy Lodge offers various wildlife holidays and wildlife-watching trips of half and full days. Residents often get the chance to see a pine marten in the evenings.

Evening pine marten-watching for non-residents is also occasionally offered. Check website for details

 glenloywildlife.co.uk

Glencoe Mountain Resort has four hardstanding pitches with hook-up. Campervans and motorhomes have, in the past, been allowed to park overnight at the bottom of the car park and a donation requested if the facilities are used. At the time of writing this was no longer allowed, so check beforehand

their Scottish holiday tales.

A delightful break from hillwalking was the excellent waymarked cycle route from Glencoe towards Oban, particularly the nine miles that are off-road after Ballachulish.

We wheeled towards Duror, mostly following an old railway line that hugs the coast and encourages regular stops to appreciate the panoramic views across the shimmering water of Loch Linnhe.

The cycle route takes a turn uphill above Kentallen Bay, but the engineers helpfully placed a bench at the top. We propped up our bikes against it and relaxed with the warm sun on our arms, taking in the views to distant mountains.

Pine martens, once killed for their fur, are now protected and their numbers have risen slowly in Scotland. They are still rare, so seeing one has been on my hypothetical bucket list for many years.

Glenloy Lodge near Fort William has a 'resident' pine marten and I had booked an evening wildlife-watching there, crossing my fingers that this elusive mammal would show up. On an idyllic, still evening, we cycled along the Caledonian Canal from the campsite at Corpach.

At the car park by Neptune's Staircase – a flight of eight locks – we were collected by

LEFT Looking over Glencoe and Loch Leven

BETWEEN CLOCKWISE The cycle route along Loch Linnhe has spectacular views; The magnificence of Ben Nevis' craggy northern buttresses; Invercoe Highland Holidays

Glenloy Lodge and driven along the single-track road to the former hunting lodge.

We settled into a conservatory while bread cubes, liberally smeared with sugar-free peanut butter, were distributed along the garden wall and windowsill.

Almost immediately a graceful female, with chestnut-brown fur and a long bushy tail, slid down the conservatory drainpipe searching for food.

Ignoring the quietly excited audience behind the glass, she came within a few feet, delicately eating her titbits.

At this distance I could see her large paws and sharp claws, cat-like teeth and resplendent thick fur. Satisfied, she carefully took three cubes of bread in her mouth to feed her hungry kits in the nest and scurried off. Delighted, we had tea and cake while keeping an eye on the garden.

A red squirrel visited as well as a greater spotted woodpecker and chaffinches helped themselves to the peanut butter.

Eventually the pine marten returned and, this time, came right up to the windowsill. I was pretty much nose-to-nose with a pine marten! This was a dream come true.

As I rode back to the campsite, I was on a

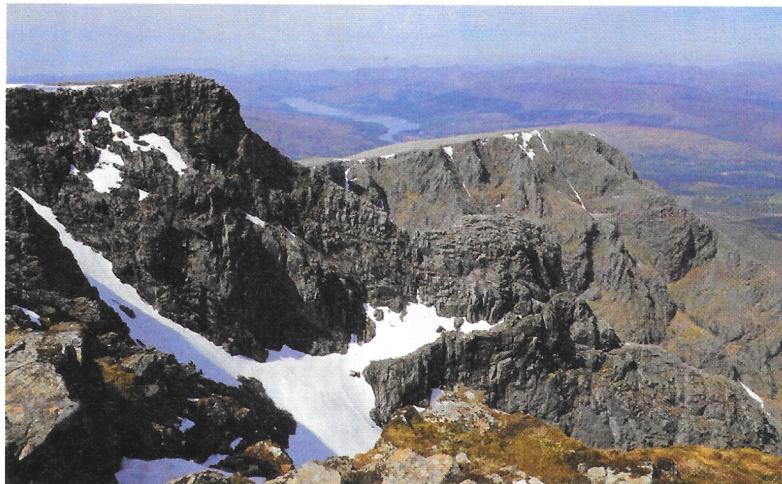
high from the evening's wildlife-watching – but Scotland had even more to offer.

We were just in time for jaw-dropping views from the canalside at Corpach of Ben Nevis, burnt orange in the setting sun. I watched the spectacle in awe. If you have a wish list and this sight isn't on it, I suggest you add it now.

The final day of our trip was, once again, spent hiking uphill in the sunshine – but there the similarity with Ben Nevis ends.

From near Glenfinnan we walked up Sgurr an Utha, a 2,611ft Corbett and we didn't see another hiker all day. The grassy hillside was abundant with wildflowers, including tiny purple butterwort and orchids on the slopes and delicate pink trailing azalea higher up. From the rock-strewn summit, the views stretched over the hidden Loch Beoraid as far as the islands of Eigg and Rum.

From bulky Munros and superb wildlife to modest Grahams, in company or solitude, Scotland has everything for those with and without a bucket list and, as we found out, it even has sunshine. We woke the next day to heavy rain, but I pulled on my cagoule, smiling smugly. **mmm**



WE STAYED AT

Glencoe Mountain Resort, Kingshouse, Glencoe PH49 4HZ

01855 851226

glencoemountain.co.uk

1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: £20 (showers £1)

Invercoe Highland Holidays, Glencoe, Argyll PH49 4HP

01855 811210

invercoe.co.uk

1 All year

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: £29

PREMIER PARK 2021

Glen Nevis Caravan & Camping Park, Glen Nevis, Fort William PH33 6SX

01397 702191 glen-nevis.co.uk

15 March – 5 November

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £28.50

Linnhe Lochside Holidays, Corpach, Fort William PH33 7NL

01397 772376

linnhe-lochside-holidays.co.uk

15 December – 31 October

£ Two adults, pitch and electric: From £23

