

BETWEEN WOODLANDS AND WATERFALLS



A journey into vast moorlands, snow-dusted mountains and the restless waters of Loch Tay

Words & pictures ■ Carol Kubicki

White waterfalls, friendly cafés, forest trails, a secret castle and the shifting light on Loch Tay are just some of the reasons to visit the Scottish village of Killin. It is also an easy drive from our Lancashire home. I visibly relax as we head north from Stirling in search of the Highlands and our campervan confidently wends its way through wooded Strathyre, Loch Lubnaig to its left, and powers up the steep climb to the summit of Glen Ogle. From here it could almost freewheel to Killin and we are soon pitching at the brilliant Caravan and Motorhome Club Maragowan site. Make this journey yourself and you will understand why Killin has become one of our favourite destinations for a few days of campervanning.

It was March on our most recent short break here and there was still a sprinkling of snow on the mountains. The chilly air kept many campers away, and plenty of the coveted riverside pitches were available for our silver machine. On other occasions we have had to look out for a pitch to become free and move the 'van to be alongside the burbling and bubbling River Lochay. This view, and hearing shrill peep-peep calls of oystercatchers as they wing by and spotting dippers on the rocks are just some of the reasons Killin is special.

Gazing along the river with my mug of tea, it sparkled in the sunshine; despite seeming so harmless, the wardens had been telling me that it had flooded the site just a few weeks before they opened for the season.

We were keen to stretch our legs



MAIN PHOTO

There is a watermill beside the Falls of Dochart

ABOVE

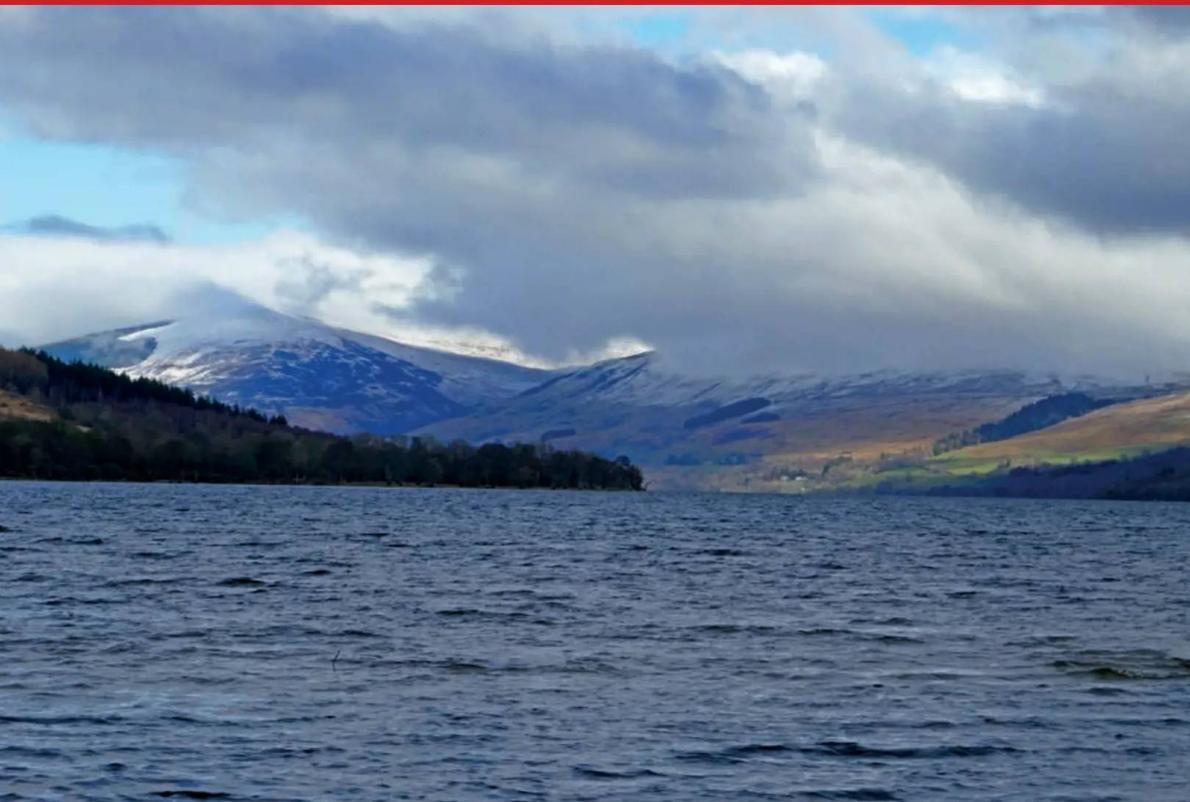
Ben Lawers is 1,214m high

after hours of driving and where to stroll on your first afternoon is an easy decision at Maragowan. Near the site entrance is a lane by the cemetery which leads to the old railway line to the village or, further along, a grassy path to the shore of Loch Tay. Birdsong signalled the coming spring and we pointed out signs of beavers to each other as we passed distinctive nibbled tree trunks.

Stood at the lochside, shadowy clouds hurried across the blue sky and the snow-tipped mountains played peek-a-boo. The colour-changing water was ruffled by the breeze. We returned on the disused railway line and climbed the wooded bank to Finlarig, Killin's secret castle. The ruins are crowded by old yew trees but flowering daffodils brightened up the shadows. Originally a four-storey castle with two towers, it was built in the seventeenth century by the local laird and, wandering around the crumbling

✓ TOP TIP

● The short heritage trail can be downloaded and will give you a good overview of Killin's history



walls, I could trace the castle's footprint from the ruins. Stories tell that Rob Roy MacGregor, a Scottish folk hero and outlaw, visited Finlarig Castle in 1713.

Being a hiker in Scotland, you often have to set off optimistically and, to be fair, it didn't rain until after lunch the next day. Leaving Killin on the minor road along Glen Dochart, we eyed the grey clouds, hoping the

meteorologists were mistaken. A red kite flew overhead and a red deer watched us across fields as we walked on the quiet lane between farms. We ate our lunch in a sheltered spot near woodland, warming up with coffee from our flask and looking out for a third red, a red squirrel.

Crossing the A85, this wistfulness came over me as we climbed up to the grassy disused railway line that



contours along the hillside, bordered by silver birch trees. Back in the nineteenth century, steam trains huffed up Glen Ogle and puffed along the length of Glen Dochart, skirting close to Killin but not close enough. The village, keen to be better connected, raised the money locally to construct a four-mile-long branch line from the Glen Dochart line. This branch line had stations in Killin and



ABOVE LEFT

From the shore of Loch Tay we watched shadowy clouds hurry across the sky

ABOVE CENTRE

Feeling on top of the world

BOTTOM LEFT

The view from Doune Castle's towers

INSET

A red deer watched us pass by

FIND OUT MORE

- To download the Killin Heritage Trail **W** lochlomond-trossachs.org/discover-the-park/our-heritage-culture/heritage-walks/killin-heritage-trail
- Doune Castle is run by Historic Environment Scotland **W** historicenvironment.scot
- Walk Highlands has walks of all lengths and you can buy a useful app from its website **W** walkhighlands.co.uk

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ABOVE RIGHT
The bridge over the Falls of Dochart

LEFT
Doune Castle has been a film location

BELOW RIGHT
Finlarig Castle is Killin's secret castle

hordes of passengers.

The weather forecast eventually proved accurate and we were now walking headlong into a bitter easterly wind that hurled stair rod rain at us; we were glad to reach the shelter of the forest. Crossing back over the main road, we picked up the old Killin branch line down to the village and, leaving our dripping waterproofs and boots in the

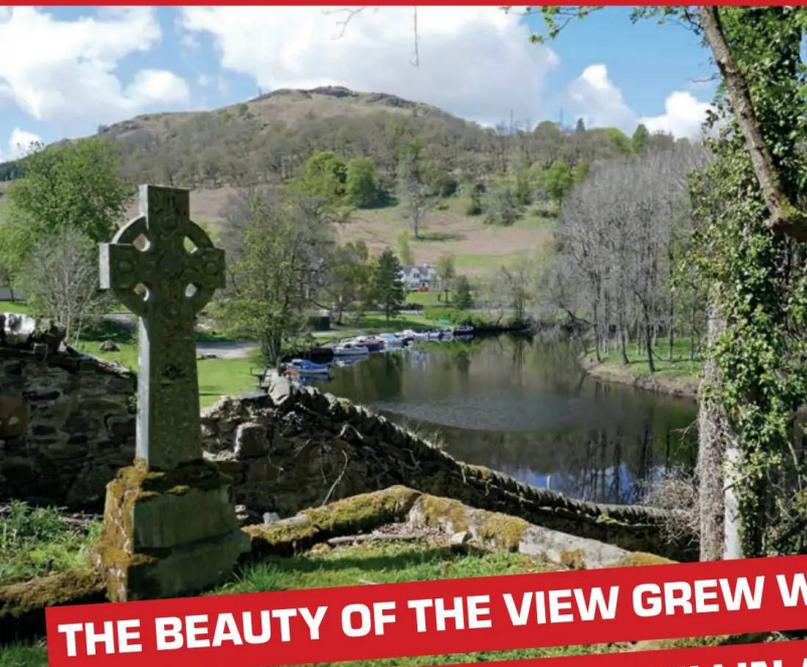
campsite drying room, we were soon cosy in our 'van and feasting on tea and cake.

Being able to pack away dry waterproofs the next morning is a treat not to be underestimated. As we returned to the disused railway line into Killin we discussed why many campsites pretend it never rains in the UK and don't provide a drying room. Leaving the line for the village,

at a pier on Loch Tay, where day trippers hopped aboard waiting boats. Both lines closed in the 1960s. What remains are old track beds for walking and cycling and traces of those early days of rail travel. We sheltered under substantial stone bridges, crossed a short viaduct and walked along a platform built for



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**THE BEAUTY OF THE VIEW GREW WITH OUR ALTITUDE,
AS WE LOOKED DOWN ON KILLIN AND LOCH TAY**

we stopped to admire the nineteenth century St Fillan's Church whose corrugated iron is painted white and green, and we found a friendly café that served us delicious coffee and scones at its sunny outdoor tables.

The Falls of Dochart are Killin's biggest tourist attraction. Spray fills the air as the white water of the falls tumbles over rocks and rushes under the bridge before separating around

Inchbuie Island, a Clan MacNab burial ground. The local heritage trail informed us that St Fillan built a watermill by the falls for grinding meal in the eighth century. Today's watermill is more recent and was used for weaving tweed. The local stones used in the construction of the bridge and watermill add to the harmony of the scene.

We had a long walk planned, so stopped dawdling and picked up a steep minor road that climbed up the forested hillside above the village. Despite being forced to catch our breath repeatedly, the beauty of the view only grew with our altitude, as we looked down on Killin and Loch Tay. The knobby Tarmachan Ridge and the snow-capped peaks of the Ben Lawers mountain group make a superb backdrop.

The lane eventually levelled out as it crossed moorland. We were following the Rob Roy Way, a 79-mile long-distance walking route that begins near Loch Lomond and ends in Pitlochry to the east. It connects the various locations of Rob Roy MacGregor, a local legend who

ABOVE
LEFT TO RIGHT
The River Lochay in Killin

Daffodils at Doune Ponds Nature Reserve

LEFT
The Kitchen Tower at Doune Castle

fought on the winning side at the Battle of Killiecrankie and he was known as Rob Ruadh (Gaelic for red) for the colour of his hair and this was anglicised to Rob Roy.

Our climbing ended at Loch Breaclaich, a remote reservoir nestled in the hills. Scrambling up to the curved rim of the adjacent quarry, we descended through Achmore Wood on a track lined with primroses and yellow coltsfoot. On the boggy path to Killin a red squirrel finally turned up, bouncing across the path into the trees. Near the village, we could see the well-preserved stone circle below but didn't have enough energy to make the diversion.

The next morning we drove south from Killin to the village of Doune, using the recently created Park and Stride car park, a perfect parking area for a halt and leg stretch. From the car park you can stroll around the Doune Ponds nature reserve, flooded gravel pits surrounded by woodland. There is a network of paths as well as benches for picnics and wildlife watching.

Despite the intention to visit Doune Castle, first we wanted to get

✓ TOP TIP

● Walk down to the shore of Loch Tay at different times of day to enjoy the different light on the water and the mountains



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a feel for its defensive riverside position. We crossed the River Teith and followed daffodil and tree-lined tracks to the riverbank, where the solid grey walls of medieval Doune Castle loomed over the water with the kitchen tower and the gatehouse peeped over the parapets.

Back in Doune we wandered through the attractive village to the castle entrance. This sturdy castle was used for filming *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* in the 1970s and has been on our must-do list for years. At the entrance we were given an audio guide narrated by Python member, Terry Jones. In his warm, comedic style, Terry introduced us to the castle's fourteenth century builder, Robert Stewart, the First Duke of



ABOVE RIGHT
Walking by Loch Tay

BELOW
Loch Tay and its snow-capped mountain backdrop

INSET
Primroses heralding spring

Albany, and the power behind the Scottish throne for years.

Doune Castle doubled up for a number of locations in the film and, along with the history, Terry Jones narrated stories from the shoots, interspersed with clips from the film. We were soon giggling in a corner of the sheltered courtyard looking up to the battlements where they filmed the scene of a guard insulting Arthur and Sir Galahad. For *Outlander* fans, Doune is Castle Leoch and the actor who played the warrior, Jamie Fraser, tells the filming story.

Even without a film interest,

OUR 'VAN

A 2021 Devon Firefly on a Ford Custom Transit SWB 2.0-litre. This is our third Devon Conversions 'van and we love the layout that packs so much into a sub-five-metre van



Doune Castle is impressive, and exploring the rooms I could picture the Great Hall as a lavish and rowdy dining room.

In the kitchen, standing in the fireplace large enough to roast a whole ox, I felt pocket-sized. We both found the grooves in the stone where cooks sharpened their knives and puzzled over the unusual double fireplace in the Duke's Hall, while, in our ears, Terry Jones mused on whether this was an early version of the two-bar electric fire.

We finished in the gift shop and laughed to see it sold coconut shells, which must baffle anyone who hasn't seen *Monty Python and the Holy Grail!* We left delighted and drove home recalling our favourite scenes from the film.



STAY AT

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