

Get away for...

THE WEEKEND!

As the road narrows and the landscape rises, everyday pace gives way to Highland calm

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: 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 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 Caravan and Motorhome Club's Maragowan site. Make this journey yourself and you will know why Killin has become one of our favourite destinations for a few days of camping.

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. 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.

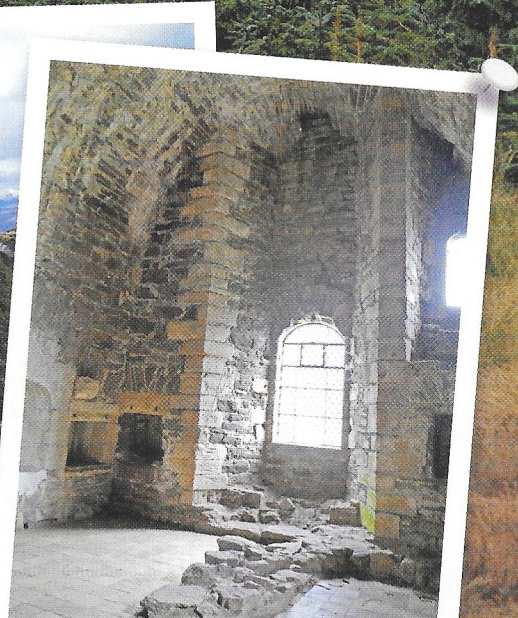
This view and hearing shrill peep-peep calls of oystercatchers as they wing by and spotting dippers on the rocks are just some of the reasons Killin is special.

Gazing along the river with my mug of tea, it sparkled in the sunshine and seemed harmless, but the wardens had been telling me that it had flooded the campsite just a few weeks before opening for the season. ►

*Why?... Killin is a good base for walks
from a mile or two to long mountain days*



MAIN Ben Lawers is 1,214m high
FAR LEFT The bridge over the Falls of Dochart
BELOW LEFT Feeling on top of the world
BELOW RIGHT Doune Castle has been a film location



ABOUT US...



US Carol Kubicki and husband, Anthony. We explore beautiful places in our Blue Bus whatever the season, being keen walkers, fair-weather cyclists and improving birdwatchers

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

We were keen to stretch our legs 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 anticipated 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 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.

I am not prone to nostalgia but occasionally I notice handy services that are no more and feel a sense of loss. 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



Must do... Make time to stop at Doune Castle on your way to or from Killin

from the Glen Dochart line. This branch line had stations in Killin and at a pier on Loch Tay, where day trippers hopped aboard waiting boats.

Both lines closed in the 1960s and I felt nostalgic for the transport opportunities enjoyed by earlier tourists. What remains are old track beds for walking and cycling and traces of those early days of rail travel. We sheltered under stone bridges, crossed a short viaduct and walked along a platform built for 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 in the campsite drying room, we were soon cosy in our 'van and feasting on cake.

Being able to pack away dry waterproofs the next morning is not to be underestimated. As we walked 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, 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 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 ➤

BELOW FAR LEFT The impressive gatehouse of Doune Castle

BELOW The River Lochay in Killin



THE JOURNEY

The drive north from Lancashire is part of the pleasure. Beyond Stirling, the road slows and the landscape rises, passing lochs, forests and the climb through Glen Ogle. Dropping into Killin feels like a true arrival, where mountains, water and calm take over



THE COSTS

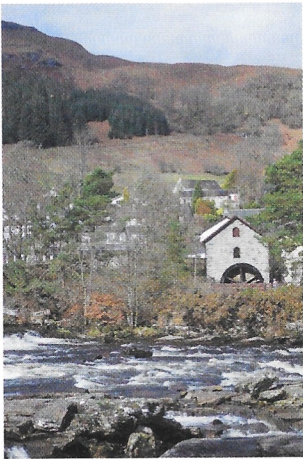
Fuel: Average 40mpg (430 miles)	£74
Site fees	£94
Entrance fees: two adults	£16
Total	£184

INFORMATION

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





ABOVE Walking by Loch Tay; There is a watermill beside the Falls of Dochart

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. The drama of the views over the glen improved as we climbed higher and we stopped often to catch our breath and look down on Killin and across Loch Tay to the high mountains to the north. 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 visits locations associated with Rob Roy MacGregor; a legend in his own lifetime thanks to Daniel Defoe's fictionalised biography of him, published while he was still alive. Born in 1671, he was known as Rob Ruadh (Gaelic for red) for the colour of his hair and this was anglicised to Rob

Roy. He fought on the winning side at the Battle of Killiecrankie and as a businessman he drove cattle to market in Crieff and may have herded his beasts along the same lane we were hiking.

Our climbing ended at Lochan Breaclaich, a remote reservoir nestled in the hills. Scrambling up to the curved rim of the adjacent quarry, we took in the panoramic and breathtaking views.

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 the energy to make the diversion.

The next morning, we drove south 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. ►



Must see... Loch Tay, a 15-mile freshwater loch which lies in the valley between Killin and Kenmore

TOP TIPS

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

The short heritage trail can be downloaded and will give you a good overview of Killin's history
W motorhome.ma/killintrail

ABOVE Loch Tay and its snow-capped mountain backdrop

BELOW A red deer watched us pass by



We were stopping in Doune for a few hours and so began with coffee in the nearby hotel. We intended to visit Doune Castle but first wanted to get 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 peeping 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 in the 1970s and 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 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 shoots, interspersed with clips from the film. We were soon giggling in the

courtyard looking up to the battlements where they filmed the scene of a guard insulting Arthur and Sir Galahad.

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. **www**



WE STAYED AT

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