



Heavenly
Highlands

If you love mountains and like a sense of achievement then you'll revel in this very special area of Scotland

WORDS & PHOTOGRAPHY: Vivienne Crow



Vivienne Crow...

...endured years of long-haul travel and is now enjoying getting to know places closer to home in her campervan

Sweat was pouring down my face as I fought my way up the steep, stony slope, struggling to gain purchase on the loose ground. I knew that, if I stopped, I'd lose momentum and possibly even start sliding back down the mountain. I had to keep going and I mustn't look over to my right where the ground suddenly disappeared into the dark corrie far below.

I was tired, having already climbed almost 4,000ft and there was hardly a breath of breeze on this sweltering day in the northwest Highlands.

Within minutes, though, I was standing on top of the 3,500ft Sgurr Fhuaran, the highest of the Five Sisters of Kintail, one of the most famous mountain groups in the Highlands. I'd wanted to walk this high, rocky, roller-coaster ridge since first reading about it in the early 1990s. But I'd been putting it off.

With so much rock, including a couple of sections of scrambling, I knew I'd never persuade my partner, Heleyne, to join me. Then I hit 50 and realised it was time...

"How was that?" asked Mike Godfrey, the mountain guide I'd hired to lead me along this classic route. "Great!" I exclaimed with genuine glee as I performed several 360-degree turns with a big grin on my face, admiring the fantastic outlook from this airy summit. The sight of all those mountains marching off into the distance – to the north, east, south and west – had pushed all thoughts of the strenuous climb from my head. We could even see Ben Nevis more than 30 miles away.

I was dumbstruck by the sight of the peaks we'd already climbed – rocky pinnacles strung out above a wall of formidable black crags riven by scree-filled gullies, many of which still clung to late snow. It was a scene that was simultaneously enthralling and terrifying. Had I really walked that?

Not only had I walked it, but I'd enjoyed almost every moment (apart from that last ascent, of course). It'd been a long slog up from the car park beside the A87 in Glen Shiel. Even that had been accompanied by increasingly spectacular views and a mounting sense of excitement.

A pleasantly narrow, but grassy, ridge had then led west from the col on to Sgurr nan Spainteach – the Peak of the Spaniards – named in honour of the Spanish soldiers who bravely (but unsuccessfully) supported the Jacobites during the battle that took place in Glen Shiel in 1719.

At 3,247ft, we'd now entered a rock-bound world and more taxing terrain, ►



LEFT Eilean Donan Castle seen across the loch



INFORMATION

Mountain guides for bespoke days out on the hills

kintailmountainactivities.co.uk

Walks and advice for Scottish hills

walkhighlands.co.uk

Prepare a visit to Eilean Donan

eileandonancastle.com

The jewel of the Highlands

visitplockton.com

Discover the wild and wonderful Lochalsh

lochalsh.co.uk

Glenelg and Arisdale tourist info

glenelgscotland.com

Navigate the clever maps on this website full of tourist info

undiscoveredscotland.co.uk

National Trust for Scotland protects over 100 places

nts.org.uk

clambering up slopes of scree and unsteady boulders and scrambling down rock steps. It was the latter that had caused me the most concern when planning this trip, but Mike calmly talked me down, suggesting good hand and foot holds as I faced into the rock and blotted out all thoughts of what would happen if I slipped.

The Five Sisters ridge was my second walk with Mike. Earlier in the holiday, as a warm-up to the big day, he'd taken me up two 'easier' summits to the east: Am Bathach and Ciste Dhubh. I was glad of this relatively gentle start. On driving into Glen Shiel with Heleyne the previous day, I'd had a sudden attack of nerves.

The sight of all those pointed peaks, rearing up above horribly steep slopes and still dotted with patches of snow, had sent shivers down my spine. What was I doing? I should just abandon this and be content with the Lake District. But Am Bathach and Ciste Dhubh put me at ease.

"How are you coping with the sense of exposure?" asked Mike as we made our way up the final, narrow section of ridge leading

to the highest point. "Exposure?" I asked, peering over the precipitous, rocky edge and down on to the cliffs of the mountain's eastern flanks. I was loving it! This was what I'd wanted from the Highlands. "There's nothing more exposed than this on the Five Sisters," Mike informed me, reassuringly.

For the next few days, in between my two walks with Mike, Heleyne and I explored the area with our terrier, Jess. We'd often driven through Glen Shiel on the way to Skye or Torridon or the far northwest, staring up in awe at the mountains. However, this was the first opportunity we'd had to spend any time here and see the area without the insect-splattered windscreen of our campervan getting in the way!

We had a few nights' wild camping and a few nights on the Caravan and Motorhome Club's Morvich site. The latter is surely one of the most dramatically situated campsites in the UK. It's close to the southeastern shores of beautiful Loch Duich, but with steep-sided mountains looming over it to the north, east and south.

Evening dog walks consisted of strolling

Trip summary

OUR MOTORHOME

Our Peugeot-based 2002 Auto-Sleeper Symbol, known fondly as Hamish, is only 17ft 3in long and 7ft 2in wide, making for easy driving on narrow, winding roads



THE JOURNEY

In May, we travelled from Carlisle to the edge of the northwest Highlands, exploring Glen Shiel and the Lochalsh and Glenelg peninsulas. We spent four nights on a site and three nights wild camping

THE COSTS

Fuel average 30mpg.....	£118
Site fees.....	£89.60
Attractions two adults: Eilean Donan Castle.	
One adult: guided hill walks.....	£135

2002 Auto-Sleeper Symbol

690 miles

Total £342.60

ABOVE LEFT The remains of the staircase between the walls of Dun Telve broch

ABOVE RIGHT Mountain guide, Mike Godfrey, leads the way towards Sgurr nan Saighead, nearing the end of the Five Sisters ridge



through gorgeous bluebell woods fringing the River Croe while gazing up at the surrounding 3,000ft-plus peaks and watching, binoculars at the ready, for red deer. On one occasion, the binoculars were unnecessary as a stag nonchalantly grazed just a few yards from the path. The soft velvet on his new antlers was clearly visible; we could almost reach out and stroke it.

At the other end of Loch Duich is one of the Highlands' most famous landmarks, Eilean Donan Castle. The first fortification was built here in the thirteenth century,

ABOVE LEFT The picturesque Highland village of Plockton

ABOVE RIGHT Enjoying the view of Loch Duich with the Five Sisters looming in the background

BELOW The A87 weaves its way through spectacular Glen Shiel

protecting the region from Norse raiders.

A later, more substantial castle was then laid waste by government forces during the 1719 Jacobite rising. After bombarding it from the sea for three days – with limited success because of the thickness of its walls – the troops stormed the castle and destroyed it with its own gunpowder stores. Having lain in ruins for the best part of two centuries, Eilean Donan was then rebuilt in the early decades of the twentieth century by Lt Colonel John MacRae-Gilstrap, a senior member of the Clan MacRae. ►





ABOVE Steep, scree-covered mountains tower over Corran

TOP TIPS

Apart from the A87, many of the roads in the region are single track and there are one or two steep sections, most notably the route from Shiel Bridge to Glenelg via the Bealach Ratagain. Be prepared to use passing places. Note that the road from Plockton to Achmore has a 9.5m (31ft 2in) length restriction on it

There is limited roadside parking for the Glenelg brochs. You may have to walk from the southern end of Glenelg village less than two miles from Dun Telve

National Trust for Scotland's Kintail rangers organise guided walks in the summer, including the Five Sisters, the South Glen Shiel ridge and the remote Falls of Glomach.

The rangers' office is next door to the Morvich Caravan and Motorhome Club site

01599 511231
kintail@nts.org.uk

To get to the castle, we walked across a small, stone bridge from the busy visitor centre and café. As soon as we reached the tiny, rocky island sitting in the mouth of Loch Duich, where it opens out into the choppy waters of Loch Alsh, I immediately regretted the shorts and T-shirt I'd happily been wearing all day. "I always tell people to dress as if they were going out on a boat when they tell me they're coming to the castle," said a sympathetic guide who saw me shivering. "We're practically on the open sea here and it sometimes feels about 10 degrees colder than it is on shore." I wished I'd met her earlier.

Further west along the A87 is the hilly peninsula of Lochalsh, gateway to the Isle of Skye and home to the 2,750-hectare Balmacara Estate, owned since 1946 by the National Trust for Scotland. A network of largely unfenced and often single-track lanes links together the area's crofting communities. The spectacular views of the rugged coast and the distant mountains change with every twist and turn of the road.

On the northern side of the peninsula, overlooking Loch Carron, is the former herring fishing village of Plockton. I'd never visited it before, but I'd seen pictures of it – lots of pictures. It's the sort of place that, on a sunny day, is just begging to be photographed: a row of cute cottages sitting beside a serene, sheltered harbour, a few cabbage-palms dotted about for that Gulf Stream-induced feel of the exotic and, of

course, those mountains...

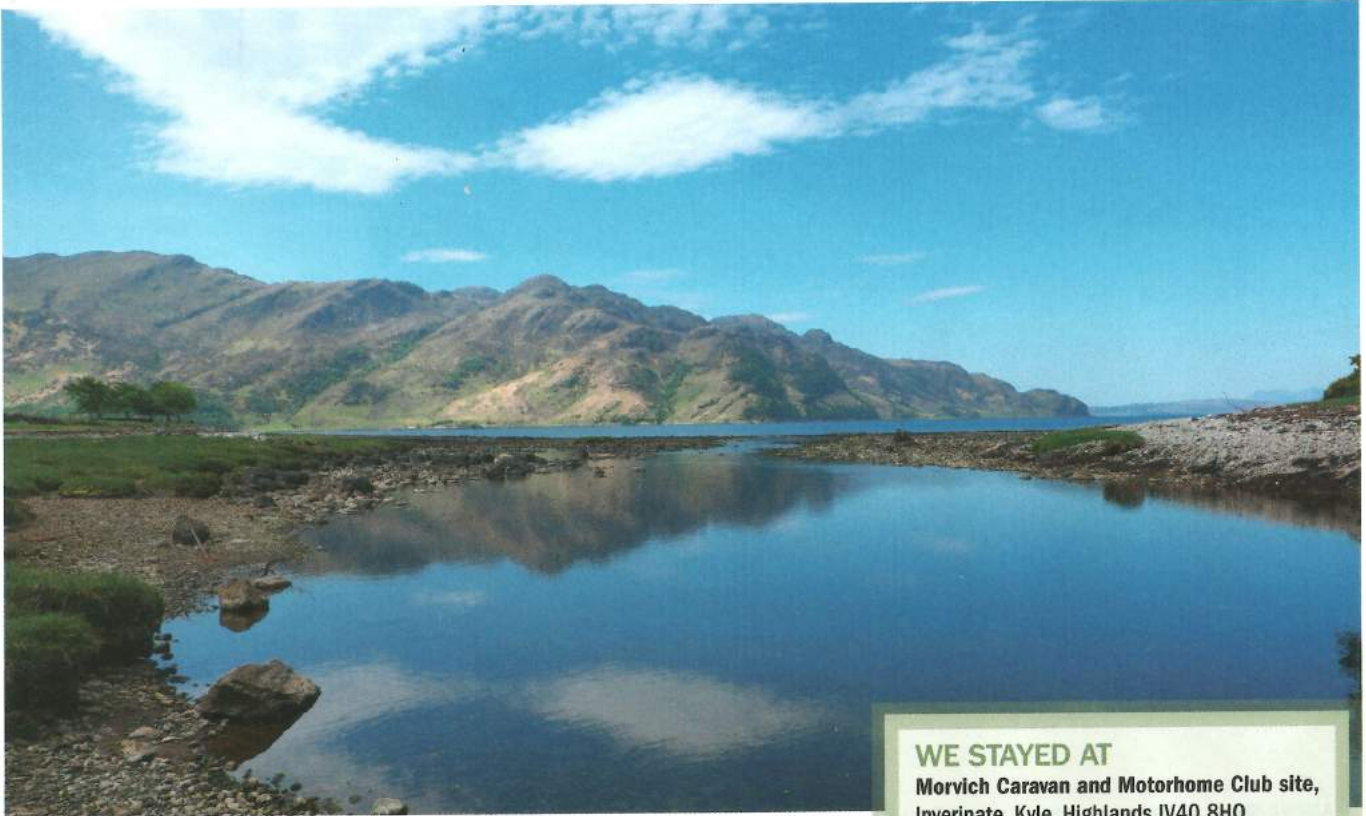
I'd been expecting crowds, in fact I'd been dreading crowds. We'd just driven into Kyle of Lochalsh, intending to explore it, but then driven straight out again when we saw how busy it was.

Plockton, on the other hand, was fairly quiet. We strolled along the harbourside, enjoying the laid-back feel to the village and the warm sunshine. Preparations were being made for a beer and gin festival at the Plockton Hotel and the monthly craft fair was underway in the village hall.

On the south side of the peninsula, we set our sights on the Balmacara forest trails for a decent dog walk, but took a wrong turn and ended up instead in the Lochalsh Woodland Garden. We followed a lovely trail through the higher part of these tranquil woods, where Asian species such as rhododendron and hydrangea added a splash of colour, before dropping through an area of tall, slender pines.

The sparkling loch could be glimpsed through the trees. From time to time we were able to look across the narrow sound to Skye. It might not have been as rugged or as long a walk as we'd originally planned, but I was glad we'd stumbled across this gem.

Another pleasant surprise – that's something of an understatement – was the Glenelg peninsula. A wild camp on the road up to the Bealach Ratagain led me to wonder what was on the other side of the pass. So, one day, we continued up to the ▶



ABOVE From Corran, looking across the still waters of Loch Hourn to Knoydart

bealach and beyond.

What we found was a Highland paradise, one that was so adored by Gavin Maxwell (author of *Ring of Bright Water*), that he tried to keep the location of his secluded sanctuary here a secret. The place he called Camusfearna in his famous nature memoir is actually Sandaig, an idyllic sandy bay with a group of tiny islands. One of these islands can be reached on foot at low tide.

A couple of miles away are the ruins of two Iron Age brochs: Dun Telve and Dun Troddan. These tall towers have stood guard over Glen Beag for 2,000 years or more. The inner and outer concentric walls of both are still partially intact and, between them, are the remains of the dark staircases that led to the upper levels. This is where the human inhabitants would have resided while their livestock occupied the ground floor.

With a cuckoo calling, adding to the peace and sense of isolation in this unspoilt valley, I loved exploring these impressive ancient remains.

A winding road led south from Glenelg, beside the Sound of Sleat, up through conifer forests, in and out of gloriously green deciduous woods, along the slopes of towering, scree-covered mountains and beside the waters of remote Loch Hourn. Every few hundred yards or so I'd have to slow down to fully appreciate the sparkling

WE STAYED AT
Morvich Caravan and Motorhome Club site,
 Inverinate, Kyle, Highlands IV40 8HQ
 ☎ 01599 511354 🌐 caravanclub.co.uk
 📅 15 March - 4 November
 💷 Two adults, pitch and electric: From £18.20

scenery or jump out of the 'van and simply take a big gulp of this amazing place.

This was an impressive road, winding and single-track, but never difficult to drive.

In the loneliest of places, we reached the settlement of Arnisdale with a few lochside cottages with those severe mountains rearing up behind them – from sea level to almost 3,200ft in little more than a mile. Then, a little further on, heavenly Corran.

This was the end of the road, but we continued on foot along part of the old coast path.

This route, which once linked the tiny fishing communities along the shores of Loch Hourn, continues for five miles, sometimes threading a carefully engineered line across awkwardly inclined slabs of rock.

We didn't walk the full length of the path, though; it was enough simply to sit at the water's edge and soak up our magnificent surroundings.

I know the image of this place will live long in my memory, alongside many other exceptional moments from what was a very special trip. 🏠

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