

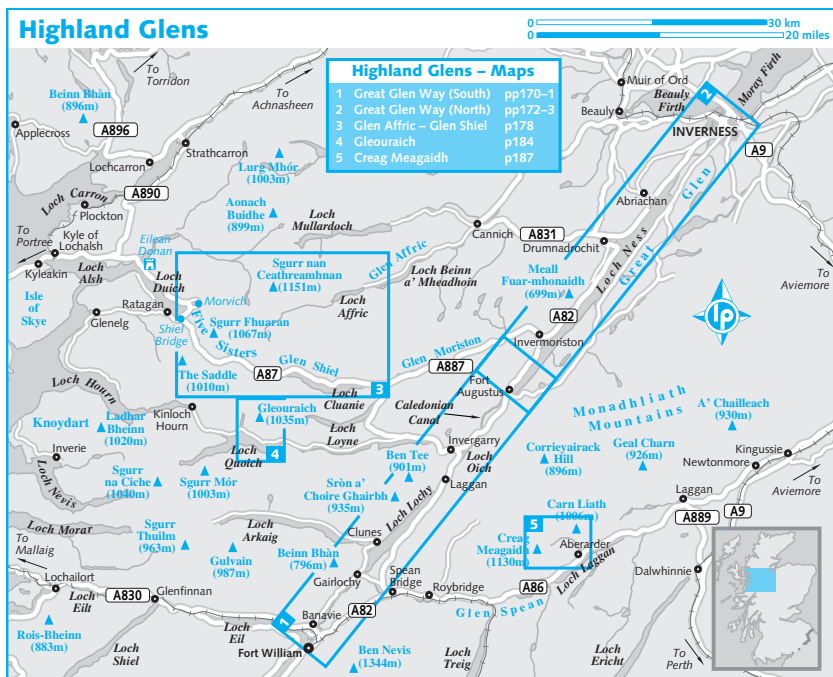
Highland Glens

Highland and glens are two of the most evocative words associated with Scotland – touchstones for images of misty, rugged mountains and long, lonely valleys. These are, in fact, the essential features of the Highland Glens area, extending from Glen Garry and Glen Spean in the south to Strathconon in the north, and west from the Monadhliath Mountains to the east coast. Here you'll find several beautiful and very different glens and straths (broader valleys); scores of mountains of all shapes and sizes; waterfalls, lochs and tumbling rivers; and, of course, dozens of first-class walks at high and low levels. In this chapter we offer a tempting sample of these riches.

The Great Glen Way is a first-class long-distance path through the grandest glen of all, from Fort William to Inverness, following some long stretches of the historic Caledonian Canal, the line of an old railway and traversing high above famous Loch Ness. Glen Affric is generally regarded as the most beautiful of all the glens. Here we describe a two-day walk through this wild, road-free glen to Morvich, very close to the west coast, with suggestions for alternative routes and side trips, including the spectacular Falls of Glomach. A small selection from the wealth of mountain walks on offer takes in the Five Sisters of Kintail, one of the finest ridge walks anywhere in Scotland; Gleouraich, a remote Munro above Loch Quoich in western Glen Garry; and Creag Meagaidh, a magnificent massif cradling an awesome corrie in Glen Spean.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Striding along the Caledonian Canal and wondering about the legend of Loch Ness on the **Great Glen Way** (p168)
- Wandering through Caledonian woodland in beautiful **Glen Affric** (p174) as you follow the footsteps of early travellers over a pass towards the west coast
- Traversing the **Five Sisters'** (p180) slender, scenic ridge above dramatic Glen Shiel
- Mountain-filled views from the summit of ice-sculpted **Creag Meagaidh** (p184)



ENVIRONMENT

Putting it simply, these mountains were formed when two enormous plates of the earth's crust rammed together and the plates were bent and folded into peaks and ranges. Much later, ice sheets and glaciers, which accumulated in successive ice ages, enlarged the glens and sculpted the mountains.

The Great Glen – a near-straight-sided trench running from Inverness in the north-east to Fort William in the southwest – almost splits the Highlands asunder. It's the result of massive shifts along a geological fault line eons ago; Loch Ness and Loch Lochy, the largest of the Glen's chain of lochs, were later gouged out by glaciers. To the north and northwest of the Great Glen, the rocks are almost universally metamorphic (altered sediments), of ancient origin and known as schist. This produces poor soil that supports vast tracts of heather and grass moorland. Small remnants of the native Caledonian woodland survive, mainly in Glen Affric (see the boxed text on p175). You're never far from a conifer plantation, although none are of any great size.

INFORMATION

Maps & Books

For overall planning the best bet is the OS Travel – Road 1:250,000 map No 2 *North-western Scotland*.

The most comprehensive guide to the area for walkers is the Scottish Mountaineering Club (SMC) *Hillwalkers' Guide North-west Highlands* by Dave Broadhead, Alec Keith and Ted Maden; it is beautifully illustrated and has colour maps.

For delving into historical background, you can't do much better than James Hunter's books, fired by a passionate commitment to devolution of power to Scotland, and those by John Prebble on the Clearances. To understand something of the traditional Highland ways of life, Calum I Maclean's *The Highlands*, an insider's view of this unique culture, is peerless.

Information Sources

The local branch of **VisitScotland** (www.visithighlands.com) is a fruitful source of information for planning your trip, including accommodation bookings. For public transport

information, the most direct source is **Traveline Scotland** (www.travelinescotland.com).

GATEWAY Inverness

☎ 01463 / pop 41,000

Scenically located on the shores of the inner Moray Firth, Inverness is the bustling, thriving capital of the Highlands, proudly proclaiming its status as a city.

The **TIC** (☎ 234353; www.visithighlands.co.uk; Castle Wynd; ☎ daily Easter-Oct, Mon-Sat Nov-Mar; 🚗) provides a comprehensive service, including accommodation bookings.

Highland Council's **countryside ranger service** (☎ 724312) runs an extensive program of guided walks in the Inverness area between March and December.

SUPPLIES & EQUIPMENT

Several of the major outdoor gear shops have a branch here, including **Tiso's** (☎ 716617; 41 High St; ☎ daily), which is also the best place in town for maps. **Waterstone's** (☎ 717474; 50-52 High St; ☎ daily) stocks a wide range of Scottish titles and travel and walking guides.

The most central of Inverness' large collection of supermarkets is **Morrisons** (Millburn Rd), near the train station; there's also a good **health food shop** (Baron Taylor's St).

SLEEPING & EATING

Bught Park Caravan Park & Campsite (☎ 236920; www.invernesscaravanpark.com; Bught Park; unpowered/power sites for 2 £9/10) is very close to the Great Glen Way, on the southern edge of town. Pitches are flat and grassy, and it's very popular in the high season.

Inverness SYHA Hostel (☎ 0870 004 1127; www.syha.org.uk; Victoria Dr; dm £15; 🚗) is in a large, rather soulless modern building in inner-suburban Inverness. The tariff includes a continental breakfast; some rooms have their own bathroom.

Ardconnell House (☎ 240455; www.ardconnell-inverness.co.uk; 21 Ardconnell St; s/d £35/60) is a terraced Victorian house with comfortable en suite rooms in a comparatively quiet street, only a couple of minutes from the city centre.

When it comes to eating out, you're seriously spoilt for choice these days in Inverness. Most of the best places, including the three recommendations, are alongside the River Ness, where there are a few first-rate Italian restaurants.

The **River Cafe & Restaurant** (☎ 714884; 10 Bank St; breakfast £6, lunch mains £5-8, dinner mains £9-15; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) enjoys a good location overlooking a quiet stretch of the River Ness. The menu and the daily specials reflect both Mediterranean and Scottish influences; presentation and service are excellent.

Shapla Tandoori (☎ 241919; 2 Castle Rd; mains £7-13; ☎ lunch & dinner) offers an extensive menu featuring tandoori and biryani dishes; book early for one of the tables directly overlooking the River Ness.

Mustard Seed (☎ 220220; 16 Fraser St; lunch mains to £8, 2 courses to 7pm £12, dinner mains to £15; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a lively, busy place for which booking is almost essential. Fish features prominently on the menu (changed weekly – always a good sign), and vegetarian dishes are imaginative rather than token gestures.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

easyJet (☎ 0870 600 0000; www.easyjet.co.uk) operates daily flights from London Luton and

LOW-FLYING JET AIRCRAFT

It's a perfect sunny day, the breeze is a mere whisper and you're enjoying a peaceful walk. Suddenly, without warning, an ear-splitting roar destroys the tranquillity and one or two sinister-looking military aircraft flash past at an alarmingly low altitude, possibly even below you. This unwelcome intrusion can happen almost anywhere in the Highlands and in many places elsewhere. During walks research for this book, they howled through Glen Sligachan and over Loch Coruisk on Skye, raced down Loch Ness, roared past Quinag in the northwest and screamed through Glen Shiel and above the Road to the Isles.

Fortunately not a daily presence, though seemingly permanent and totally unpredictable, these supersonic jets of the Royal Air Force (RAF) and/or the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) are practising low flying manoeuvres, mainly from Scottish bases. These skills, we are told, are put to good use overseas in combat zones.

Protests have proved futile, and despite the massive consumption of fuel and consequent pollution, the authorities insist it's vital for national security.