

# Northwest

The north of Scotland, beyond a line joining Ullapool in the west and Dornoch Firth in the east, is the most sparsely populated part of the country. Sutherland is graced with a generous share of the wildest and most remote coast, mountains and glens. At first sight, the bare 'hills', more rock than earth, and the maze of lochs and waterways may seem alien – part of another planet – and unattractive. But the very wildness of the rockscapes, the isolation of the long, deep glens, and the magnificence of the indented coastline can exercise a seductive fascination. The outstanding significance of the area's geology has been recognised by the designation of the North West Highlands Geopark (see the boxed text on p264), the first such reserve in Britain. Intrusive developments are few, and many long-established paths lead into the mountains and through the glens.

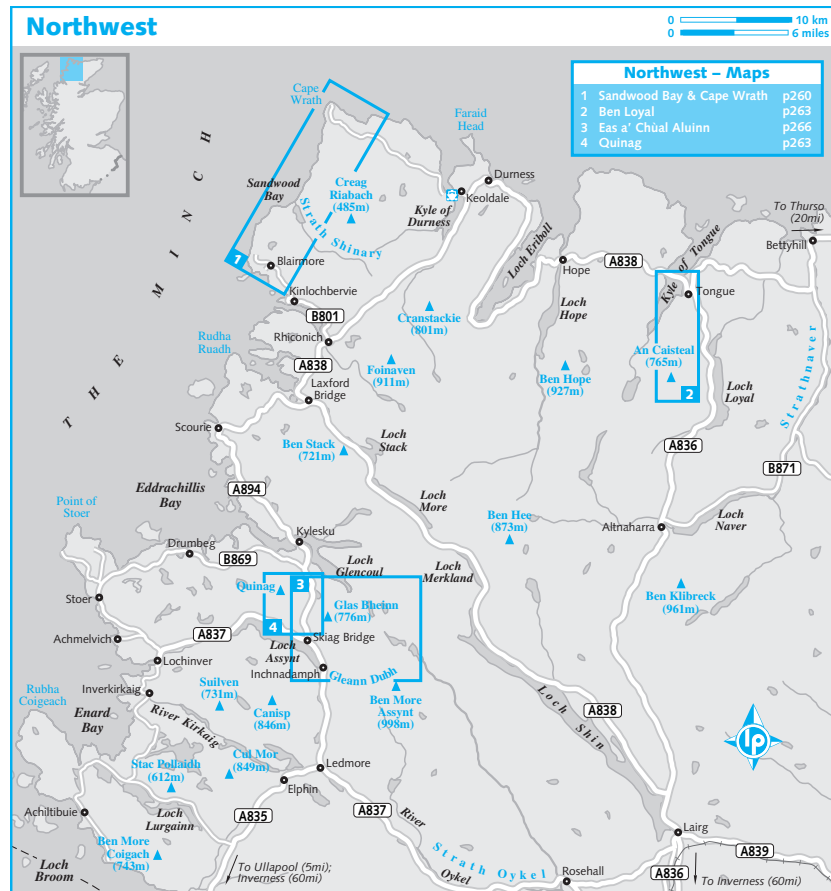
This chapter focuses on a variety of walks in Sutherland's northwest corner. Incomparably beautiful Sandwood Bay is the highlight of a superb coast walk to Cape Wrath, Scotland's most northwesterly point. Ben Loyal, overlooking the small village of Tongue on the north coast, is an intriguing peak, topped by a cluster of granite tors. The ascent of Quinag, a striking mountain in the heart of the Assynt district, is nowhere near as difficult as it looks. By way of contrast, secretive Eas a' Chùal Aluinn, Scotland's highest waterfall, is reached only after a trek across wild moorland. Suggestions for other walks sustain the infinite variety that characterises Sutherland, and include the delightful Falls of Kirkaig, south of Lochinver, and the distinctive, seemingly inaccessible peak Stac Pollaidh.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Walking along the pristine beach at **Sandwood Bay** (p261), en route to the towering cliffs at northwestern Cape Wrath
- Pottering about among the breezy pinnacles and crags of **Ben Loyal** (p262)
- Venturing deep into a rocky mountain wilderness to stand atop **Eas a' Chùal Aluinn** (p265), Scotland's highest waterfall
- Capturing the amazing patchwork panorama of lochans, hills and crumpled coastline from **Quinag** (p267)

■ [www.visithighlands.com](http://www.visithighlands.com)

■ [www.assynt.info](http://www.assynt.info)



## INFORMATION Maps & Books

For use during route planning, and for general orientation while you're on the walk, the OS Travel – Road 1:250,000 map No 2 *Northern Scotland* is ideal.

The Scottish Mountaineering Club's published guide, *The Northwest Highlands*, which is jointly authored by DJ Bennet and T Strang, is a very authoritative read. It also manages to capture the scenic magic of the area extremely well.

The Pathfinder guide, *Skye and the North West Highlands*, by John Brooks and Neil Wilson, includes details on 13 walks within the northwest area. *Walks West Sutherland*, by Peter and Rosemary

Koch-Osborne, is another option, which provides succinct descriptions of 23 walks in the region.

## Information Sources

To access general information on things such as accommodation listings and booking facilities throughout the northwest area, try going to **VisitHighlands** (☎ 0845 2255 121; [www.visithighlands.com](http://www.visithighlands.com)), a really useful offshoot of VisitScotland.

**Traveline Scotland** (☎ 0870 608 2608; [www.travelinescotland.com](http://www.travelinescotland.com)) provides public transport timetable information. **Highland Council's** (☎ 01463 702660; [public.transport@highland.gov.uk](mailto:public.transport@highland.gov.uk)) free *Public Transport Timetable: Sutherland* is invaluable, and is available from TICs.

## SANDWOOD BAY & CAPE WRATH

<b>Duration</b>	6½–7 hours
<b>Distance</b>	14 miles (22.5km)
<b>Difficulty</b>	moderate
<b>Start</b>	Blairmore
<b>Finish</b>	Cape Wrath
<b>Nearest Towns</b>	Kinlochbervie (opposite), Durness (p260)
<b>Transport</b>	bus

**Summary** An outstanding coastal walk, from an incomparable beach to the northwestern tip of the country, through a remote and uninhabited area of great beauty and wildness.

Cape Wrath, the northwesternmost point of mainland Scotland; Sandwood Bay, the most beautiful beach in the country; and the long stretch of magnificent, unspoiled coastline between them are the evocative and irresistible highlights of this finest of coast walks. This is also lonely and remote country – not a soul lives anywhere near the route, except at its southern extremity in the crofting settlement of Blairmore, north of Kinlochbervie. An extensive area around Sandwood Bay and nearby Sandwood Loch is owned and managed by the John Muir Trust (see p31) in partnership with the local community.

The recommended direction is south to north, arriving at the dramatic landmark of Cape Wrath after several hours along the coast. You may feel, however, that it is better to start from the relatively civilised, although forlornly deserted, Cape Wrath lighthouse and to walk into the wilderness. Another factor to consider is the moorland trek between Sandwood Bay and Blairmore, which some may find desolate.

**Alternatives** If you're fit you could do the walk from Blairmore to Cape Wrath and back in a day, but camping at Sandwood offers the chance of an almost unique experience in Scotland – beach camping, and being lulled to sleep by the soothing music of the waves. Thus, you could spread the walk over a much more leisurely three days: one into Sandwood, another to the cape and back, and a third back to Blairmore. Choose your pitch with care, steering well clear of the fragile dunes. If there's enough driftwood to make a good fire, light it on bare sand.

In midsummer, and transport permitting, it is possible to walk from Cape Wrath to Sandwood and back in a day from a base in Durness on the north coast; the distance is 19.5 miles (32km) with 300m of ascent.

There is yet another option, although one needing even more careful organisation – walking along the road to Cape Wrath from the Kyle of Durness ferry, a distance of about 10 miles (16km). However, this means you're going through the Royal Navy's Cape Wrath firing range, where live ammunition is fired fairly regularly and unexploded shells may lurk on the moorland beside the road. 'Activity dates' are posted at the Durness TIC or you can ring ☎ 0800 833 300 for details. The website [www.durness.org](http://www.durness.org) has a detailed explanation of what this is all about and a link to the relevant site.

### HISTORY

Cape Wrath's name comes from the Norse word for 'turning point' – it was clearly a crucial landmark for the Vikings during their incursions in the north and west between the 9th and 13th centuries.

The hazards involved in navigating the often stormy seas around here were long recognised and led to the building of the lighthouse at the cape by Robert and Alan Stevenson in 1828. The last keepers left by 1997, when people were replaced by automatic equipment; the once-handsome buildings are now sadly neglected.

Less peaceably, part of the Balnakeil Estate on the moorland east of the cape is owned by the Ministry of Defence and has served for decades as a bombing range where live ammunition is used. The ministry claims, nevertheless, that wildlife flourishes and the landscape has been preserved.

People evicted from their lands on the north coast settled around Sandwood (and Sheigra to the south) in the 1820s, but their descendants were ejected in 1847 and the area repopulated with sheep. Sandwood Lodge, built during the 19th century (now roofless but stable), was used by shepherds until the 1950s. The land was returned to local people 50 years later. The John Muir Trust purchased the 4650-hectare Sandwood Estate in 1993. It extends from Sandwood Loch and Strath Shinary south to Loch Clash at Kinlochbervie and inland

for up to 6 miles (10km). Essential to the management of the estate is the participation of local crofting communities through a special committee.

### ENVIRONMENT

Along the coast, the cliffs, deep inlets (geos) and the offshore stacks and islets are predominantly sandstone, mixed into ancient gneiss, the most widespread rock type. At Cape Wrath the red gneiss cliffs soar to a height of about 120m. A few miles east, at Kervaig, are reputedly the highest coastal cliffs in mainland Scotland, at 284m. Glaciers and ice sheets left their mark in sculpting the river valleys; large gneiss boulders perched on sandstone platforms were left behind by retreating glaciers.

The peatlands, sand dunes and machair (coastal grasslands) from Sandwood to Sheigra, and the dunes and machair between Sheigra and Oldshoremore (all within the John Muir Trust's Sandwood Estate) are protected in two Sites of Special Scientific Interest. The machair, found only in relatively few places along the west coast and in the Western Isles, comes alive between late June and August with carpets of globeflower, bell flower, vetch, knapweed and orchid.

### PLANNING

#### What to Bring

If you're planning to camp at Sandwood Bay, a fuel stove is an absolute must, as are a trowel (there are no toilets) and a bag to

carry out all your rubbish. Water containers will be handy; some camp sites are close to the limited supplies of freshwater but they're midge havens in summer. For more information, contact the manager of **Sandwood Estate** (☎ 01971 521459); he will also be able to fill you in on guided walks around the estate during June and July.

### Maps

The walk is covered by the OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 446 *Durness & Cape Wrath*, and the OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 9 *Cape Wrath*.

### NEAREST TOWNS

#### Kinlochbervie

☎ 01971

Principally a fishing village, Kinlochbervie is dominated by large port facilities around the sheltered harbour. The nearest ATM, TIC, camping ground and hostel are in Durness (p260).

**Braeside B&B** (☎ 521325; s/d £23/46) is a friendly, long-established place in the village centre.

**Old School Restaurant & Rooms** (☎ 521383; [www.oldschoolhotel.co.uk](http://www.oldschoolhotel.co.uk); *Inshegra*; s/d £40/70, mains £9-18; ☺ dinner) occupies a former primary school that served the local community for nearly a century. Accommodation is in an adjacent modern building, where some rooms look out across Loch Inchard.

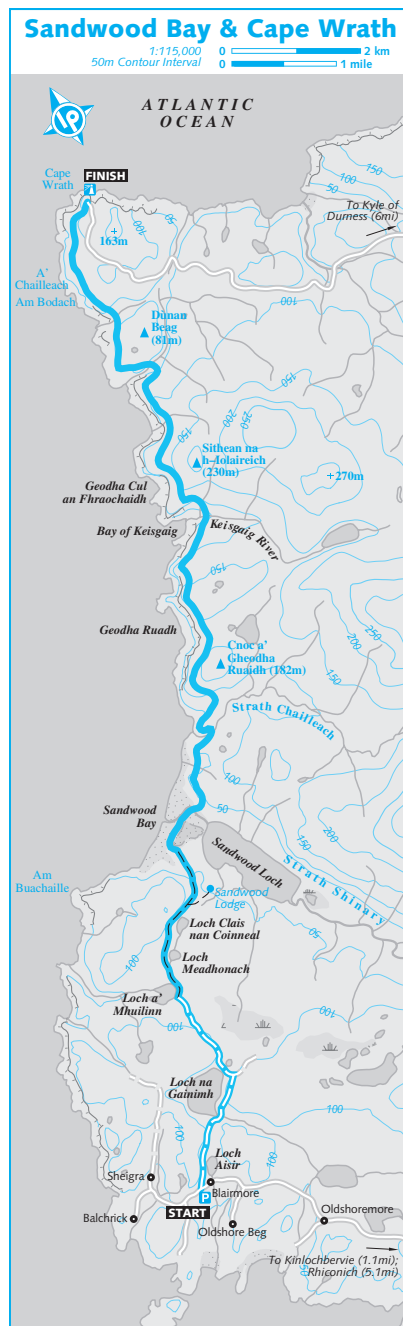
**Kinlochbervie Hotel** (☎ 521275; [www.kinlochberviehotel.com](http://www.kinlochberviehotel.com); s/d £55/90, mains £9-17; ☺ lunch & dinner)

### WHERE NOT TO CAMP *Sandra Bardwell*

The shore of Sandwood Loch seemed an idyllic camp site – right beside a freshwater supply, where we could also take a dip after a warm day's walk. But we were still pretty naive about camping in Scotland during summer – we'd heard about midges but hadn't much idea about where they lived.

So we pitched the tent beside the tranquil, reed-fringed loch then spent the day walking up to Cape Wrath and back. We returned to the tent in the early evening and the breeze that had kept us cool on that warm July day had died. We lit the stove for a brew but, within a minute, were reduced to futile, flailing anguish as the black clouds of voracious insects swarmed upon us – even into our mouths.

Clearly, cooking a meal would be impossible, so instant relocation was the only answer. All the unpacked gear was frantically stuffed into our packs and we ran across the dunes to the beach and its midge-free expanses of bare sand. All that remained was the dome tent, its inner already lying in a heap on the sand. So, we pulled out the pegs, crawled inside and picked it up, and once again ran for the beach, seeing the way through the tent's cream panels. Our only regret was that someone didn't arrive with a camera, or preferably a video recorder, to immortalise the sight of a dome tent with four brown legs, moving at high speed through the Sandwood dunes.



occupies a scenic position on the Sheigra road, just north of the village. Fresh local seafood is a highlight of the thoughtfully put together restaurant menu.

**Bervie Stores** (☎ daily, 12.30-2.30pm Sun), a small Spar supermarket, sells maps, among other things.

For transport information see Getting There & Away for Durness (below).

## Durness

☎ 01971 / pop 363

A surprisingly large, spread-out village on the coast, Durness lays unbeatable claim to being the most northwesterly village in Britain.

The **TIC** (☎ 511259; [www.visithighlands.com](http://www.visithighlands.com); ☎ daily Jun-Sep, Mon-Sat Apr, May & Oct) is at the eastern end of the village and houses a small display about local places of interest and sells maps and books. The local website [www.durness.org](http://www.durness.org) is a rich source of background information. There's an ATM at the village store.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Sango Sands Camping Site** (☎ 511761; Sangomore; unpowered/power sites for 2 £10/13), near the TIC and beside the main road, has plenty of grassy pitches and uninterrupted ocean views.

**Durness SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1113; [www.syha.org.uk](http://www.syha.org.uk); Smoo; dm £12), overlooking the sea, is about 1 mile east of the village on the main road beside the collection of fluttering flags.

**Corrie Lochan B&B** (☎ 511341; [www.corrieloach.co.uk](http://www.corrieloach.co.uk); s/d £27/50), a few hundred metres south of the village, has pleasantly appointed rooms and a large lounge facing the sea.

**Balnakeil Bistro and Craft Shop** (☎ 511232; Balnakeil craft village; mains £5-9; ☎ lunch & dinner; ☎), barely 1 mile west of town, is a refreshingly homely place serving freshly prepared, mainly traditional dishes.

**Sango Sands Oasis** (☎ 511222; mains £7-9; ☎ lunch & dinner to 7.30pm), next to the camping ground, is usually busy; the bar meals are bog-standard but plentiful.

The **Spar** (☎ Mon-Sat) village store sells camping gas and liquid fuel for stoves. There's also Mather's licensed grocers opposite the TIC.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

**Tim Dearman Coaches** (☎ 01349 883585; [www.timdearmancoaches.co.uk](http://www.timdearmancoaches.co.uk)) runs a seasonal service

between Inverness and Durness (£18, five hours) via Lochinver, Inchnadamph and Kinlochbervie. The Monday-to-Saturday service operates late April to late September, and the Sunday service in July and August.

## GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

### To the Start

The walk starts at Blairmore, a hamlet on the Kinlochbervie-Sheigra road, 3.4 miles (5.4km) from Kinlochbervie. There are public toilets, a car park and a public telephone.

A subsidised **taxi service** (☎ 521477) operating in the Kinlochbervie area (daily except Tuesday and Saturday) can take you to (and from) Blairmore (£1). Call the evening before to arrange a pick-up. Full details are given in the Highland Council's *Public Transport Timetable: Sutherland*, available from TICs.

### From the Finish

If you are walking north from Sandwood Bay, be sure to contact the ferry and bus operators in advance to ensure they are waiting for you.

The **Cape Wrath minibus service** (☎ 511343) bounces its way along the rough road to the lighthouse from the ferry jetty on the western shore of the Kyle of Durness (£5, 40 minutes, around eight daily Easter to September).

**Kyle of Durness ferry** (☎ 511376) meets the minibus and crosses the Kyle to the jetty at Keoldale (£3, 10 minutes, around eight sailings daily, Easter to September), at the end of a minor road, which branches off the A838 about 2 miles south of Durness.

## THE WALK

From the Blairmore car park, set out along the unsealed road signposted to Sandwood. This road, used by crofters tending their sheep, leads across the rather featureless moorland, which is enlivened by several nearby lochs. It becomes a path at Loch a' Mhuilinn. Little more than 1 mile further on, the path (much of it repaired and built by John Muir Trust volunteers) curves round a steep-sided hill on the left and starts to descend, affording the first glimpse of the beach at Sandwood Bay.

A flat, grassed area with old, stone-walled enclosures is a possible camp site.

Water should be available from the small burn near the roofless cottage about 200m to the south; otherwise you'll have to go right down to peat-dark Sandwood Loch, although it may be slightly brackish. The shore of Sandwood Loch may seem like an idyllic camp site but beware the midges (see the boxed text on p259).

The path leads down through marram-grassed dunes to the beach at **Sandwood Bay**, a superb sweep of pinkish-cream sand (about 1¼ hours from the start). The towering rock stack of Am Buachaille stands guard close to the cliffs that extend south-west from the sands.

Walk north along the beach, cross the outlet from Sandwood Loch on stepping stones and go up the steep, sandy slope ahead, through a gap in the low cliffs. Cross a patch of grass and make your way through the jumble of rock slabs and boulders down to a shallow valley, then along the cliff edge to Strath Chailleach.

Cross the stream at the top of the cascades and follow the spur leading northeast for about 500m then turn generally north to skirt the steep-sided Cnoc a' Gheodha Ruaidh on its seaward side. Keep close to the cliff edge, across a dip above Geodha Ruadh and up past the next hill.

At the top of the long slope down to the **Keisgaig River**, there's a good view of a remarkable rock stack on the northern side of the bay, its profile resembling a rather sullen face. Just above the river is a low, turf-roofed stone shelter, somewhat the worse for wear (2¼ hours from Sandwood Bay). There's space for a tent or two nearby if you want to camp.

Cross the river just above the cascade coursing down onto the shingle beach and climb up the very steep slope. Steer a course west of Sithean na h-Iolairich to overlook the superb vertical, dark-pink cliffs in **Geodha Cul an Fhraochaidh**.

Continue along the cliff tops, mainly across bare, stony ground for 1 mile or so, to the top of the next descent to the unnamed burn immediately south of Dúnan Beag. Detour inland (northeast) around the cliffs lining the seaward reaches of the burn to a small stream junction; cross over and head back towards the cliffs.

There's a potential camp site at the next stream crossing (north of Dúnan Beag), a

short distance inland. A bit further on, the two remarkable rock stacks A' Chaillieach and Am Bodach (the 'old woman' and 'old man') dictate a photo stop. If you look back (south) from here on a clear day, Sandwood Bay is visible.

Continue across a small burn towards the lighthouse, keeping close to the cliffs. Skirt the walled enclosure around the buildings, which are now forlornly deserted, to reach the courtyard in front of the **lighthouse** and the end of the walk (about 2½ hours from the Keisgaig River).

## BEN LOYAL

<b>Duration</b>	6–6½ hours
<b>Distance</b>	8 miles (13km)
<b>Difficulty</b>	moderate
<b>Start/Finish</b>	Ribigill access road
<b>Nearest Town</b>	Tongue (right)
<b>Transport</b>	private

**Summary** A steep climb to one of the most attractive and intriguing peaks in the north, with fine views in all directions.

Ben Loyal is often called the 'Queen of Scottish Peaks'. It's thought that the name Ben Loyal comes not from some dutiful subject but from the Norse *laga fjall* meaning 'law mountain' – where laws were once promulgated. Whether or not you think any mountain should be female rather than male, let alone royal, it is indeed a fine peak. Standing proudly alone above rather desolate moorland to the south, its spectacular, cliff-lined western flank majestically overlooks the Kyle of Tongue and the coast to the north. At 765m (2509ft), Ben Loyal's summit, An Caisteal, has the status of Corbett. However, the mountain is well worth climbing for its own sake, irrespective of its title and designation.

With a longish, gracefully undulating summit ridge, crowned by clusters of granite tors, five separate summits make up Ben Loyal: Sgòr Chaonasaid (712m), Sgòr a' Bhatain (708m), An Caisteal ('the castle'; 765m), Beinn Bheag (744m) and Carn an Tionail (716m). There are also two outliers above the western crags – Sgòr a' Chleirich and Sgòr Fhionnaich.

Consisting of granite (specifically syenite), Ben Loyal stands alone in an area com-

posed principally of schist and sandstone. The belt of birch trees fringing the western slopes is also unusual in the north, so much of which is treeless.

The most popular approach is from the village of Tongue to the north. Farm tracks and rough, discontinuous moorland paths lead up onto the mountain, where the going is much easier. Having gained the summit, you could spend time exploring the individual summits and peering down into the rugged corries on the western face of the mountain. The walk involves 750m of ascent.

## PLANNING

### Stalking

During the stalking season, from mid-August to mid-October, walkers are asked to avoid areas where stalking activities are taking place on a particular day. The number to phone to find out what's happening is ☎ 01847 611291.

### Map

The OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 447 *Ben Loyal* and OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 10 *Strathnaver* cover the walk.

## NEAREST TOWN

### Tongue

☎ 01847

A scattered village, Tongue overlooks the Kyle of Tongue. Seemingly in the middle of nowhere, the village is itself dramatically overlooked by Ben Loyal. The one bank here does not have an ATM.

## SLEEPING & EATING

**Tongue SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1153; [www.syha.org.uk](http://www.syha.org.uk); dm £12), near the causeway across the Kyle of Tongue, has up-to-date facilities and fine panoramic views.

**Rhian Guest House** (☎ 611257; [www.rhiancottage.co.uk](http://www.rhiancottage.co.uk); s/d £37/54) is just south of the village in a traditional Highland cottage.

**Ben Loyal Hotel** (☎ 611216; [www.benloyal.co.uk](http://www.benloyal.co.uk); s/d £50/70, mains £6–16; ☺ lunch & dinner) commands fine, wide views, and the menu is more imaginative than many, especially in the treatment of traditional dishes and presentation of vegetables.

For supplies, there's **Tongue Stores & Post Office** (☺ Mon–Sat) and **Burr's Stores** (☺ daily, noon–2pm Sun) at the northern end of the village.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

You need to be really dedicated to reach Tongue by public transport. Catch the mid-morning **First ScotRail** (☎ 0845 755 0033; [www.firstscotrail.com](http://www.firstscotrail.com)) train from Inverness to Thurso (£15, four hours) then **Royal Mail Postbus** (☎ 0845 774 0740; [www.postbus.royalmail.com](http://www.postbus.royalmail.com)) 136 from there to Tongue (£4, 1¼ hours) about 1½ hours later. The return connection necessitates double the waiting time in Thurso.

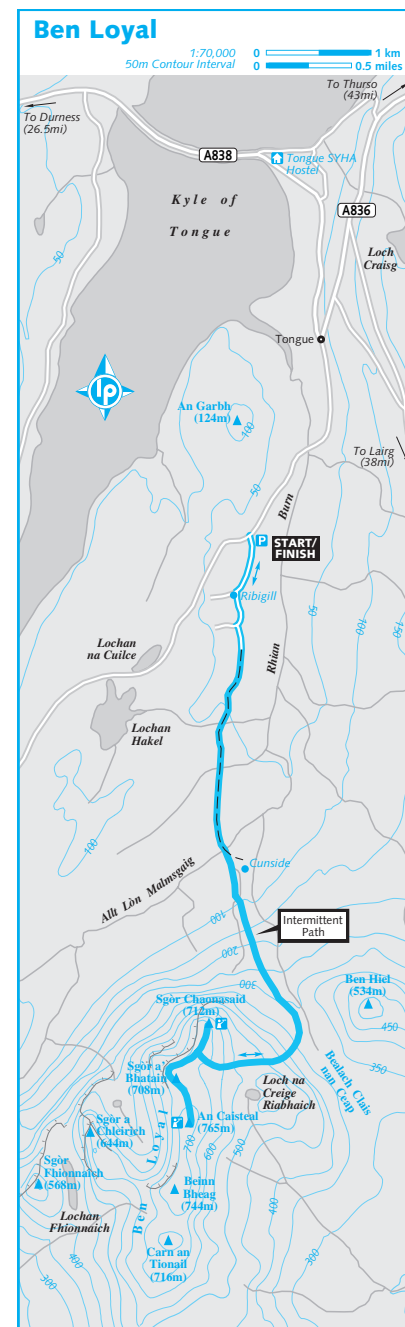
By road, Tongue is at the junction of the A838 from Durness and the A836 from Thurso and Lairg.

## GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

You can walk or drive the 3 miles (5km) south from Tongue along a minor road to the entrance to Ribigill Farm (there's a sign 'Ribigill' on the farm gate), where there is limited roadside parking.

## THE WALK

From the turn-off to Ribigill Farm head south along the private road. Bear left at the first fork (after about 650m) then, on a bend with a large derelict stone cottage on the left, continue straight on along a farm track towards Ben Loyal. As the track starts to cross the low spur, ignore another track to the right and continue south. The track is clear enough across the moorland, where there are some boggy patches. Stepping stones take you across Allt Lòn Malmgaig. Just before you reach stone-built Cunside cottage, at the foot of Ben Loyal's northern slopes, a path leads south along a narrow bank. It fades as you start to gain height steeply up the grassy moorland slope with a small stream on the left. Cross this stream after a while and continue up to the broad gap in the ridge, Bealach Clais nan Ceap. A fairly clear path leads up the slope on your right (west), above the morass in the bealach (pass), towards a cluster of low, broken cliffs. Again the path fades; evidently walkers take various ways up the steep slope. Try to avoid the wettest ground by the cliffs, making your way up to the wide, shallow valley cradling Loch na Creige Riabhaich. Continue generally northwest up to the main ridge, where a path goes north to **Sgòr Chaonasaid** (2½ hours from the start). Here there's good entertainment, scrambling around the small tors on



the summit to find the best outlook across Tongue and the Kyle of Tongue.

Retrace your steps down the ridge and continue along it, keeping to the highest ground – the path is more or less continuous. Gain height past the twin knobs of Sgòr a' Bhatain then go steeply up to a low cliff, where a rocky ramp provides an easy way up to the well-made cairn on the summit of **An Caisteal**. On a clear day you can see as far east as Duncansby Head, west to the towering cliffs beyond Durness and south to the peaks of Assynt.

There is a path south along the ridge from here – you could walk to the western side of the next summit, Beinn Bheag, for views down into the rugged corrie below An Caisteal. To return to Ribigill and Tongue, you simply retrace your steps – appreciating the very different outlook on the way.

## ASSYNT

Assynt, the legendary practice ground for mountain-building Norse gods, is a distinct geographical and cultural area in the northwest. Its northern boundary is Loch A' Chairn Bhain and its eastward extensions Lochs Glendhu and Glencoul, while the eastern limit runs along the watershed of Beinn Uidhe, Conival and Breabag (and, for practical purposes, Ben More Assynt, though it's actually east of that divide). To

the south, Loch Veyatie, Fionn Loch and the River Kirkaig separate Assynt from the district of Coigach. The coast forms its western boundary. The two possible meanings of Assynt – 'rocky' from a Norse word or 'in and out' from the ancient Gaelic – neatly summarise the area's unique landscape of rock and water, a fascinating and wildly beautiful walkers' heartland.

### PLANNING Maps & Books

Both walks in this section are covered by the OS Explorer 1:25,000 map No 442 *Assynt & Lochinver* and OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15 *Loch Assynt*.

*Exploring the Landscape of Assynt: A Walker's Guide & Map Showing Rocks & Landscape of Assynt & Inverpolly*, published by the OS and British Geological Survey, comprises a small guidebook describing 10 walks and a 1:50,000 map on which the routes are outlined. If you're particularly interested in geology, this is a must-have.

*Little Assynt Estate: Connecting People to the Land* by Robin Noble and Malcolm Bangor-Jones is beautifully illustrated and written. Though it relates specifically to the estate (see p271), it's worth having just for the photographs.

### Guided Walks

The Assynt Field Centre, based at **Inchnadamph Lodge** (☎ 01571 822218; www.inch-lodge.co.uk;

Inchnadamph), runs guided walks and courses on local geology and wildlife.

Assynt Visitor Centre (below) is where you'll find the local **Highland Council rangers** (☎ 01571 844654), who lead a varied program of guided walks in summer. The Assynt representative of the **Royal Society for the Protection of Birds** (☎ 01571 844374) also runs walks in nearby woodlands.

### ACCESS TOWNS

#### Lochinver

☎ 01571

Lochinver is a sizable village on the sheltered upper reaches of Loch Inver; originally a fishing village it is now the centre of the lively tourist industry in Assynt.

The **Assynt Visitor Centre** (☎ 844330; www.assynt.info; Main St; ☒ Mon-Sat Apr-May, daily Jun-Oct) has an excellent range of books about the area, first-class displays about local history and wildlife, and a natural-history reading room, ideal for a wet day. The daily weather forecast is prominently available. There's an ATM at the bank near the port. **Inverbank** (☒ Mon-Sat; ☒) newsagency sells maps and books.

### SLEEPING & EATING

**Shore Camping and Caravan Site** (☎ 844393; unpowered/power sites for 2 £6/8) has plenty of space for tents right on the shore. There's a small shop; fish and chips and the like are available in summer.

The nearest hostel is **Achmelvich Beach SYHA Hostel** (☎ 0870 004 1102; www.syha.org.uk; dm £12), in the beach-side hamlet of Achmelvich a few miles northwest of town. It's close to the beautiful white sandy beach, and can be as peaceful as they come.

**Veyatie B&B** (☎ 844424; www.veyatie-scotland.co.uk; 66 Baddidarrach; s/d £38/56), at the very end of the road on the north side of Loch Inver, enjoys a spellbinding view of the Suilven and Canisp peaks. Breakfast is better than most, and is served on a splendid selection of crockery from nearby Highland Stoneware.

**Riverside Restaurant** (☎ 844356; Main St; mains £10-20; ☒ lunch & dinner) is the celebrated place to eat in Lochinver. It's famous for its savoury and fruit pies (which you can take away or even have posted home) and specialises in locally caught fish. The **Conservatory** (mains £6-10; ☒ lunch & dinner) also serves the pies, of which venison and cranberry is highly regarded, and light meals.

**Caberfeidh Restaurant** (☎ 844321; Main St; mains £9-15; ☒ lunch & dinner) serves standard bar meals, including a seafood platter, and is the best alternative if you find the Riverside is overflowing.

Along the main street is a **Spar** (☒ Mon-Sat) supermarket and a butcher-greengrocer. The smaller **Inver Stores** (☒ daily) is about 800m along the Baddidarrach road.

### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Lochinver is on the A837, 10 miles (16km) west of the Skiag Bridge junction with the A894. The **Tim Dearman Coaches** (☎ 01349 883585; www.timdearmancoaches.co.uk) Inverness-Durness service stops at Lochinver (£14, three hours, daily July to September, no Sunday service April and May).

### Inchnadamph

Inchnadamph is simply a hotel, bunkhouse and a handful of houses, situated all by themselves beside the A837 north of the Ledmore junction.

**Inchnadamph Lodge** (☎ 01571 822218; www.inch-lodge.co.uk; dm/s/d £14/25/40) offers B&B in small dorms or doubles, or you can do your own cooking. There's a small shop nearby that sells groceries, frozen food, beer and wine.

The **Tim Dearman Coaches** (☎ 01349 883585; www.timdearmancoaches.co.uk) Inverness-Durness service (£13, 2½ hours, daily July to September, no Sunday service April and May) will pick up and drop off at Inchnadamph on request.

## EAS A' CHÙAL ALUINN

<b>Duration</b>	5¼–6¼ hours
<b>Distance</b>	10.4 miles (16.7km)
<b>Difficulty</b>	moderate
<b>Start/Finish</b>	Loch na Gainmhich car park
<b>Nearest Town</b>	Lochinver (left)
<b>Transport</b>	bus
<b>Summary</b>	A ruggedly scenic walk to the top of the highest waterfall in Scotland, in one of the wildest corners of Sutherland.

Eas a' Chùal Aluinn (which means 'beautiful slender waterfall') is the highest waterfall in Scotland, with a drop of 204m, most of it in three long streams with a broad cascade at the base. It may lack the sheer dramatic force of the Falls of Glomach (p179) but the

### ROCKS OF ALL AGES

The northwest corner of Scotland is an open-air geological display *par excellence*. Rocks define the basic shape of the landscape everywhere of course, but mostly they're blanketed by vegetation and settlement. But in the northwest, both are fairly thin on the ground.

Therefore the area was an obvious candidate for Scotland's (and Britain's) first Geopark. Established in 2004, the **North West Highlands Geopark** (☎ 01571 844000; www.northwest-highlands-geopark.org.uk; Culag Bldg, Lochinver) joined 25 partners of the **European Geoparks Network** (www.europeangeoparks.org), endorsed by Unesco. All are coalitions of local communities (rather than central governments) committed to celebrating their distinctive geological heritage and to achieving sustainable development.

The North West Highlands Geopark extends from the Summer Isles in the south to the north coast, and from the west coast to a ragged northeast-southwest line from just east of Loch Eriboll to Knockan. The latter boundary follows the line of the Moine Thrust, a geological feature marking the titanic westward movement of rocks soon after the coalescence of the British landmass. Within the park are vast massifs of the most ancient of rocks, Lewisian gneiss, clumps of Torridonian sandstone (Quinag, Cape Wrath) and isolated exposures of limestone (Durness).

By the time you read this, several information panels should have been installed at key sites throughout the park.

setting is wild and beautiful in a strangely compelling and desolate way.

Essentially, the walk is a crossing of the rocky ridge, pockmarked with lochans and encrusted with cliffs and scree, rising precipitously from the shores of Loch Glencoul and Loch Beag and its tributary Abhainn an Loch Bhig in the north and east. On the western side, the ridge rises from north-flowing Unapool Burn and from the many streams that empty south into Loch Assynt.

Eas a' Chùal Aluinn spills over a weakness in the long line of cliffs rising from Abhainn an Loch Bhig. Miraculously, in an otherwise almost treeless area, spindly birch clings to the cliffs, permanently dampened by the fall's spray.

The path to the falls from the A894 is well-trodden, across rough, rocky ground that is boggy in places. On a fine day you could spend an hour or more exploring the cliff tops and seeking out better vantage points for the falls. The main walk is described as an out-and-back trip from the road. A through route, deeper into the wilderness, to Inchnadamph and mostly on

clear paths is outlined as an alternative. While you're there it's well worth the effort to duck up to Glas Bheinn (opposite), a peak affording fine views.

## PLANNING

### Stalking

During the stalking season (mid-August to mid-October) walkers are asked to avoid areas where stalking is taking place on the day, although access remains open on the main paths. Information about activities and recommended walking routes in the area is available from **Assynt Estates** (☎ 01571 822208).

## GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The walk starts at a signposted car park on a sharp bend in the A894, above the north-western corner of Loch na Gainmhich. The Tim Dearman Coaches Inverness-Durness service (see p260) will stop as close as safely possible to the car park; the timetable should give you plenty of time to do the walk. The same service stops at Inchnadamph if you decide to tackle the alternative through walk.

## THE WALK

From the car park walk south along the road for about 200m and diverge down an old track to the left. It crosses a small stream then rises to meet an east-west path; turn left. The path descends to and parallels the shore of Loch na Gainmhich for about 150m then starts to rise northeast, crossing a small stream and leading on to Allt Loch Bealach a' Bhuirich. Cross and continue north briefly to meet a narrow path on the left. Walk up the northern side of a rugged, rocky valley, with fine views of the corries on the north face of Glas Bheinn, and on to dark, peaceful **Loch Bealach a' Bhuirich** (1¼ hours from the start). The bealach itself is above the loch to the east.

The path, now cairned, wastes no time in losing height down to a nameless tributary of Abhainn an Loch Bhig. Cross the burn on stepping stones and continue beside it downstream (not on the northern side as shown on the OS map). Go across very peaty ground, through a line of low cliffs and down to near the edge of the main cliff, high above Abhainn an Loch Bhig. Continue to the right (southeast) for about 250m to a good vantage point for **Eas a' Chùal Aluinn** (¼ hours from Loch Bealach a' Bhuirich) – it's next to impossible to safely get a good close-up view. A series of graceful, steep cascades fall to the green, flat-floored glen of Abhainn an Loch Bhig, meandering into tranquil Loch Beag and overlooked by cliffs on its far side.

Retrace your steps to the car park and main road.

## ALTERNATIVE ROUTE: TO INCHNADAMPH

3½–4 hours, 5.5 miles (8.7km)

Return almost to the stepping stones and, in a peaty spot between two crags (the left one topped with a cairn), turn left. A path materialises in a very short distance and rises southeast then south up a rocky spur. It crosses a shallow valley and continues rather deviously to overlook a pair of lochans. Turn right at a cairned path junction and go between these lochans then up the wild, rocky glen feeding them towards the cliffs ahead (south). The path, clear enough on the ground, is sparsely cairned. Take care to find a right-hand turn in the path, then cross a stream on mossy stepping stones and continue up to a rock shelf at the base of the steep, scree-strewn slopes. The path

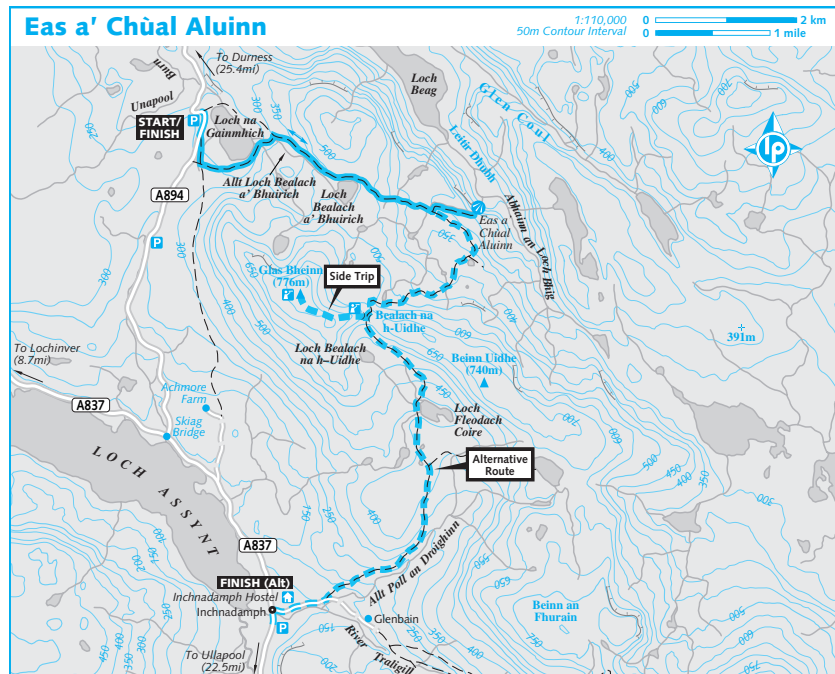
zigzags up to **Bealach na h-Uidhe** (1¼ to two hours from the waterfall), a fine lookout over the country to the south.

The path drops straight down from the gap. On the edge of the scree on the steep slope to the left, the path bends left (southeast) across a rocky shoulder then south down to Loch Fleodach Coire, becoming increasingly clear and intermittently cairned. Continue across two burns entering the loch then cross the burn flowing from the loch. Make your way through a maze of peat hags up to a broad spur, past a small lochan and on to a path junction where there's a stone shelter, used by stalkers. From here the path makes a well-graded descent into the glen of Allt Poll an Droighinn and on to meet the Gleann Dubh vehicle track near a bridge. Turn right and walk down to the Inchnadamph car park (1¼ to two hours from the bealach).

## SIDE TRIP: GLAS BHEINN

1–1¼ hours, 2 miles (3km), 150m ascent

From a large cairn at Bealach na h-Uidhe, head west up over grass then scree and some boulders on the narrow ridge to the broad summit plateau. There isn't much of a path but it's easy walking, mainly on grass, to a subsidiary top on a low cliff line bisecting the plateau. Descend slightly from here, past a tiny lochan on the left, then up over shattered rock to the 2m-high cairn on **Glas Bheinn** (776m). The views of Quinag and Suilven are truly awe-inspiring. All the mountains to the north can be seen and the view east, on a good day, extends to Ben Wyvis, not far from Inverness.



## QUINAG

<b>Duration</b>	4¼–4½ hours
<b>Distance</b>	6.5 miles (10.4km)
<b>Difficulty</b>	moderate–demanding
<b>Start/Finish</b>	Cnoc a'Choilich car park
<b>Nearest Town</b>	Lochinver (p265)
<b>Transport</b>	private
<b>Summary</b>	Enjoy the ease with which you can explore one of the more formidable of Assynt's magnificent peaks, and the superb wraparound views.

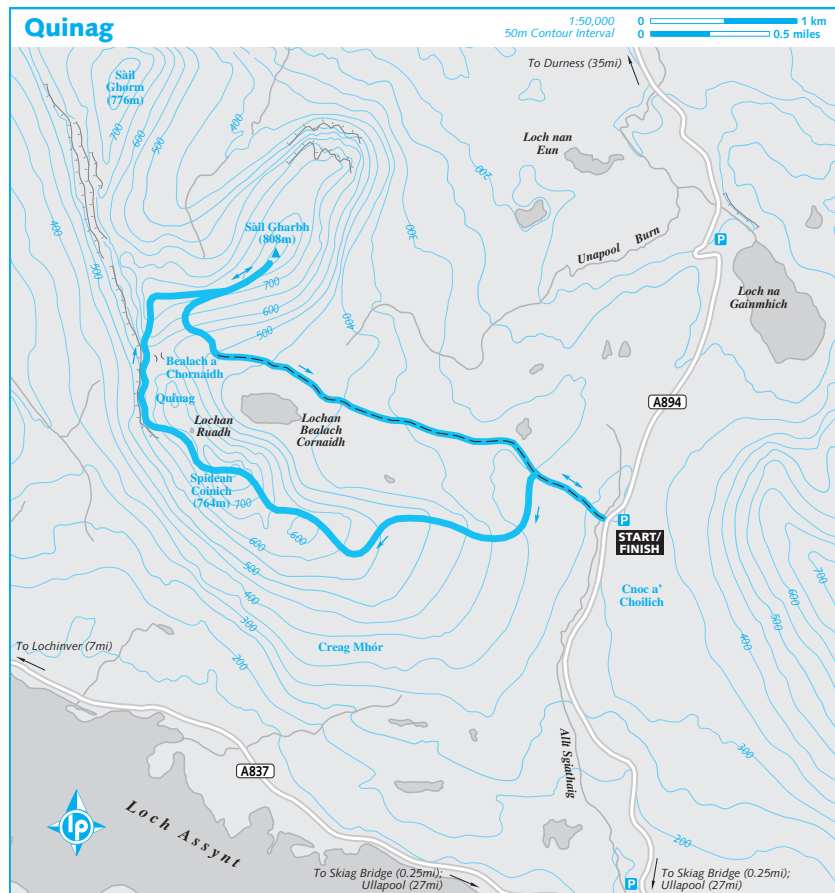
Quinag (pronounced 'koon-yak', from the Gaelic for 'milking pail') is a uniquely Y-shaped mountain barricaded by terraced

sandstone cliffs and overlooking Loch Glencoul to the north and Loch Assynt to the south. It has three distinct tops: Spidean Coinich (764m) on the southern leg of the Y, separated by deep Bealach a'Chornaidh from Sàil Gharbh (808m) on the north-eastern arm and Sàil Ghorm (776m) to the north. So steep and cliff-bound are almost all the mountain's slopes that it's a minor miracle walkers can reach any of the summits. Fortunately, the southeastern spur yields easily and the rest of the upper reaches don't present any serious difficulties. There are a few airy places nevertheless, so consider your route carefully if you suffer from vertigo. The views from the high ground are ample reward: long

swathes of coastline, tiny settlements, Loch Glencoul, Ben More Assynt and all the distinctive peaks west of the main road. With luck you may also meet a ptarmigan or two, remarkably fearless birds though difficult to spot with their camouflage suits of grey-black and white.

The route described here crosses two of the three summits – Sàil Ghorm would entail an extra 1.9 miles (3km), more than an hour of walking, and about 140m of extra ascent on top of the 860m you would already have climbed.

Quinag and its surrounds, from the shores of Loch Glencoul south to the middle of Loch Assynt, were added to the John Muir Trust's (p31) portfolio of estates in



## SHORT WALKS

### Faraid Head

The wide sandy beaches and marram-grassed dunes northwest of Durness (p260) offer delightful walking at any time of year, and especially when the tide is right out. Views of the coastal cliffs across Balnakeil Bay are superb, and the water looks tempting, though it's not exactly warm. Allow an hour or more for a delightful 3-mile (5km) partly circular walk from the car park overlooking the beach, about 800m beyond Balnakeil craft village and opposite a stone-walled burial ground. The relevant OS Landranger 1:50,000 map is No 9. A defence establishment monopolises the top of Faraid Head so access to the head itself is out of bounds (for more information about access, go to [www.durness.org](http://www.durness.org)).

From the car park (where there's an information board) walk along the beach. If the tide is in, pick up a road at the northern end of the beach and follow it north. Diverge where it turns east for close-up views of Faraid Head. If the tide is out, stick to the beach as far as boulders spread across the sand; gain the low cliff top and walk along sheep-cropped grass, generally close to the edge, northwest to a low point. Turn east and climb to a vantage point for fine views of the cliffs at Faraid Head, much frequented by fulmars, gulls and other sea birds. For the return, either loop back to the beach or head across to the road that leads to the defence site and follow it through dunes and across grassy fields, back to the beach and car park.

### Falls of Kirkaig

These beautiful cascades and waterfalls on the tumbling River Kirkaig, in the shadow of the extraordinary peak Suilven, are the focus of a 5.5-mile (9km) walk along mostly good paths from near **Achins Bookshop & Cafe** (☎ 01571 844262; [www.scotbooks.freeuk.com](http://www.scotbooks.freeuk.com); snacks & light meals £3-5; ☒ 10am-5pm Mon-Sat) – yes, a bookshop with a fine selection of Scottish titles in the middle of nowhere, and a homespun, popular café next door.

The walk starts and finishes at a car park beside a bridge over the River Kirkaig on the eastern edge of the hamlet of Inverkirkaig, 2.5 miles south of Lochinver (p265) on the narrow, winding road to Achiltibuie. Allow two hours for the walk, which involves 200m of ascent, and consult OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15.

From the car park a sign points you through a small gate to a vehicle track, past a plaque in memory of the poet and lover of all things in Assynt, Norman MacCaig. Within 200m, bear right along a path through mature birch wood, carpeted with primroses, violets and wood anemones in spring. About 12 minutes out, the path starts to gain height and, 15 minutes further on, swings northeast to cross moorland. After a while the dome and pinnacles of Suilven appear. Soon the path forks; bear right with the sign to Falls of Kirkaig. Descend to informal vantage points across the impressive cascades feeding the falls, which plunge into a wide pool. Retrace your steps to the bookshop.

2005. The estate was purchased at the express wish of its previous owners – and with the crucial help of a huge private donation – in a bid to ensure its future guardianship. In turn, the Trust has pledged to involve local people in the management of the estate.

### GETTING TO/FROM THE WALK

The car park at the start and finish is on the eastern side of the A894 Ullapool–Durness road, 2.3 miles north of the junction with the A837 Lochinver road; it is not marked by a standard blue parking sign.

### THE WALK

From the car park, walk south along the road for around 30m, then turn off along a path which crosses Allt Sgiathaig on a footbridge. Follow the pathway – generally northwest and west – across moorland. Just 10 minutes out, leave the path where rock slabs appear on the left (south); a cairn marks the spot. Continue generally southwest past a nameless, reedy lochan, across a small burn and turn west as soon as possible to walk up the almost unbroken tiers of sandstone slabs along the northern rim of the ridge. Thirty minutes from

the main path a shallow gully intervenes; turn southwest briefly to gain the broad, partly grassed ridge. Retrieve the westerly course over rocky ground; the path comes and goes but what looks like a large cairn on the western skyline serves as a beacon. It turns out to be a small circular shelter. Continue up to a crest, through a break in the rampart of grey crags. Drop down to a small saddle then head northwest, soon steeply up a clear path, to the flat summit of **Spidean Coinich** (764m), 50 minutes from the shallow gully. The marvellous view embraces the classic Assynt patchwork of land and water below the peaks of Suilven and Canisp, and Cul Mor to the south.

Descend from the southern edge of the summit – which involves some very steep work over slightly exposed crags – then follow the narrow ridge, which is a bit of a scramble in places. Go down steeply, now on the distinctive pinkish Torridonian sandstone, to Lochan Ruadh in a broad saddle. Then comes another up, mostly on grass, to a small, nameless pinnacle. Drop down to **Bealach a'Chornaidh** (40 minutes from Spidean Coinich). From a distance the next climb looked hair-raisingly steep and barred by low cliffs; the reality is nowhere near as bad. The path leads steeply up to the cliffs, where one slightly awkward move can easily be bypassed to the right. Higher up, go over the top of a rocky knoll on the main ridge, or bypass it on the eastern side, to a broad saddle with a curious pavement of sandstone slabs. Continue up the rocky ridge onto the fine-grained grey sandstone capping the flattish summit of **Sàil Gharbh** (808m), where a survey pillar lurks inside a stone shelter (40 minutes from the saddle).

Retrace your steps to the broad saddle then head generally southwest on a well-used path down and across the steep slope to meet a path in the corrie, about 150m east of Bealach a'Choinich (30 minutes from the top). The path, vague in places over wet ground, leads southeast and east, across the wide hanging valley cradling Lochan Bealach Chornaidh, down to and across a knobbly plain to a lochan-studded plateau. Here the path becomes firm for the last mile or so beyond low-lying ground, and on to the road (50 minutes from the path junction).

## MORE WALKS

### ASSYNT

#### Ben More Assynt

From the west, Ben More Assynt (998m/3273ft) hides behind its satellite Conival (987m), so that they seem to merge into one huge mass of shattered quartzite. Doing both peaks (they're Munros) in a day makes for a fairly long and strenuous, but outstandingly scenic, walk of 10.4 miles (16.5km) involving 1100m of ascent; allow seven to 7½ hours. Most folk do it as a there-and-back trip; the views on the way back are completely different from those on the way up – after the incredible summit panorama, right across Scotland. Provided you keep to the standard route via Gleann Dubh, access during the stalking season is not an issue. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15.

The walk starts and finishes at the car park at the entrance to the Inchnadamph Hotel, beside the A837 between Ledmore and the Lochinver turnoff.

#### Glen Canisp

A public footpath provides an outstandingly scenic walk of 14 miles (22.5km) across wild, rugged moorland, beside remote and beautiful lochs and past two of the north's prominent landmarks, Canisp and Suilven. It involves only 220m of ascent; allow 6½ to seven hours for the moderate-demanding outing. Alternatively, the walk could be split into two, to simplify transport arrangements, perhaps making Lochan Fada or Loch na Gainimh the turnaround points, depending on where you are based. From either direction, you can have a go at Canisp (846m) or Suilven (731m); for details of the latter see opposite. Lochinver (p265) is a convenient base for the walk. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15.

Since fording the outlet stream from Lochan Fada can be hazardous after rain, when the stepping stones can be about 50cm under water, keep this walk for a fine, dry spell. Elphin, near the starting point, is on the A835, about 15 miles (24km) north of Ullapool and 2.4 miles (4km) west of Ledmore and the A837. The walk starts 100m east of the bridge over the Ledmore River, about 1.2 miles east of Elphin on the A835. There is no formal car park nearby

but there is space for three cars beside a gate 300m east of the bridge. The walk finishes at a junction with the A837, marked by a public footpath sign to Ledmore, at the southern end of Lochinver. There is a car park about 200m to the right.

#### Suilven

Suilven (731m) is perhaps the icon for the northwest – its extraordinary terraced sandstone dome looming over Lochinver is a calendar staple. It's quite a complex mountain, however, with a longish, bristly ridge tapering away from the dome, Caisteal Liath – its highest point.

The main approach is from Lochinver, along the road to Glencanisp Lodge, then the vehicle track southeast as far as the southern end of Loch na Gainimh. An all-too-well-used path goes up to Bealach Mór, from where the summit is easily reached. A full traverse of the ridge, southeast from the bealach, calls for some scrambling and a head for heights. The walk is covered by OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15. The Scottish Mountaineering Club's guide *The Northwest Highlands* has a useful description.

Suilven is within a large estate purchased by the local **Assynt Foundation** (☎ 01571 844392; www.assyntfoundation.co.uk) in 2005.

#### Point of Stoer

If mist or low cloud rule out hill walking, then the Old Man of Stoer, a towering sea stack, and the spectacular coastline around Point of Stoer, northwest of Lochinver, are ideal. Whatever the weather, the views of the Assynt peaks are magnificent. An easy-moderate 5-mile (8km) round walk from Stoerhead lighthouse takes you along the cliff tops to the point then back over two grassy, heathery 'hills' – Sidhean Mòr and its nameless satellite, topped by a communications tower.

At the lighthouse car park a sign points to the Old Man of Stoer; follow well-used paths as close as safely possible to the cliff edge to the point nearest the Old Man, beyond which the path is less clear.

Turn off the A837 just north of Lochinver along the B869 coastal road. Follow it

for 6 miles through the villages of Clachtoll and Stoer to the signposted turnoff to the lighthouse. Follow this road north to an intersection at Achnacarnin; turn left (as indicated) and continue to the lighthouse car park. The nearest places for refreshments are at Lochinver or Drumbeg, about 8 miles east along the B869. Use OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15.

#### Little Assynt Estate

This estate, a few miles east of Lochinver, is owned by the local Culag Community Woodland Trust; its aims are to restore the natural heart of the estate with extensive tree plantings and to make it more accessible. Two waymarked routes have been developed through the low, grassy hills, past the remains of shielings (small farming settlements), secluded lochans and small birch woods. The 1-mile (1.6km) Leitir Easaidh is an all-abilities path; the other, to Loch an t-Sabhail and back, is a circular walk of around 3 miles (4km). They're described in a beautifully illustrated brochure, available from the Assynt Visitor Centre (p265).

#### Stac Pollaidh

Stac Pollaidh (612m), or Stac Polly, is perhaps the most distinctive peak among the remarkable group of mountains north of Ullapool, and the most accessible. An isolated, comb-like peak west of Elphin, it rises precipitously above Loch Lurgainn to the south and from a maze of lochs and rock to the north, and affords panoramic views as fine as those from many peaks hundreds of metres higher. An excellent path climbs round the steep eastern flank and up to the top from the north; a western extension makes a round walk possible.

The path starts at a formal car park beside the single-track road to Achiltibuie, which branches from the A835 between Ullapool and Elphin. Achiltibuie, a small village overlooking the Summer Isles in outer Loch Broom, is the nearest village and a good base for walks in the area. Allow about three hours for the 2.5-mile (4km) walk; consult OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 15.



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