



# Stirling & Central Scotland

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## Why Go?

Covering everything from the green pastures of the north-east to the mountain landscapes of Glen Lyon, from urban Dundee to the far Mull of Kintyre, central Scotland is less a geographical region than a catch-all term for everything between the Lowlands and the northern Highlands. Anything you ever dreamed about Scotland can be found here: lochs aplenty, from romantic Lomond to the picturesque Trossachs; castles, ranging from royal Balmoral to noble Stirling; whiskies, from the honeyed lotharios of Speyside to the peaty clan chiefs of Islay; and islands, from brooding, deer-studded Jura to emerald Iona, birthplace of Scottish Christianity.

The active are well catered for, with a welter of hills to climb and some of Britain's best long-distance trails to hike. Cyclists and walkers are spoiled for choice, with scenery ranging from mighty Perthshire forests to the rugged Argyll hills; from the fishing hamlets of Fife to the epic landscapes of Mull.

## When to Go

If the weather is kind, May is a magical time for exploring before the summer crowds arrive. August is the best month of the year for whale-watching off the west coast. In September there are the Braemar Gathering (Highland games) and the Spirit of Speyside whisky and music festival in Dufftown.

## Best Places to Eat

- » Café Fish (p851)
- » Breizh (p864)
- » Moulin Hotel (p867)
- » Café 52 (p876)

## Best Places to Stay

- » Monachyle Mhor (p838)
- » George Hotel (p840)
- » Argyll Hotel (p853)
- » Globe Inn (p875)

## Activities

### CYCLING

Long-distance routes include much of the northern section of the 214-mile **Lochs & Glens Cycle Way** (NCN route 7). Starting in Glasgow, it winds its way through the region's heart via Pitlochry to Inverness, and includes some wonderful traffic-free sections in the Trossachs and Cairngorms. **NCN route 77** crosses picturesque Perthshire heading west from Dundee to Pitlochry (54 miles). **NCN route 78** is a 120-mile ride between Oban and Campbeltown, while part of **NCN route 1** bisects Fife then follows the coast to Dundee, Aberdeen and on to Inverness. Browse [www.sustrans.org.uk](http://www.sustrans.org.uk) for details and maps of these routes.

For shorter rides, the Trossachs and the islands of Islay and Mull are ideal for a day or more's exploration by bike; cycle hire is available.

A great two-week tour could start by circling Arran. From here, take a ferry to the Kintyre Peninsula and loop down to Campbeltown. Then cross to Islay and Jura, timing your trip so you can take the Wednesday-only ferry from Islay to Oban and crossing by ferry to Mull. From Mull, you can cross to remote Kilchoan, and head north to Mallaig.

Fife takes cycling very seriously, and produces several maps and leaflets detailing cycle routes in this area ([www.fife-cycleways.co.uk](http://www.fife-cycleways.co.uk)). There are only a few steep hills here, and the country roads are fairly quiet.

Check out <http://active.visitscotland.com> for details and further routes in the region.

### WALKING

One of Britain's best-known long-distance walks, the **West Highland Way** ([www.west-highland-way.co.uk](http://www.west-highland-way.co.uk)), starts just outside Glasgow and finishes at Fort William. It covers 96 miles through mountains and glens via Loch Lomond and Rannoch Moor.

The route begins in the Lowlands but the greater part of the trail is among the mountains, lochs and fast-flowing rivers of the western Highlands. After following the eastern shore of Loch Lomond and passing Crianlarich and Tyndrum, the route crosses the vast wilderness of Rannoch Moor and reaches Fort William via Glen Nevis, in the shadow of Britain's highest peak, Ben Nevis.

The path is easy to follow, making use of old drovers' roads (along which Highland cattle were once driven to Lowland markets), an old military road (built by troops

to help subdue the Highlands in the 18th century) and disused railway lines.

Best done from south to north, the walk takes about six or seven days, and is completed by about 30,000 hikers each year.

The 65-mile **Speyside Way** ([www.spey-sideway.org](http://www.spey-sideway.org)) is a picturesque route running from Buckie on the northeast coast, through lush green whisky country, and finishing at Aviemore in the Cairngorms (or vice versa). Much of the route is along a peaceful disused railway line well away from traffic.

Both of these routes have baggage-carrying services available.

## Getting Around

**BOAT** Most ferries to the west-coast islands are run by **CalMac** (CalMac; ☎0800 066 5000; [www.calmac.co.uk](http://www.calmac.co.uk)). Car space on busier routes should be reserved by phone ahead of your trip.

If you plan to island-hop, you'll save money with an Island Hopscoth ticket, which offers 30 combinations that can save you more than 20% off the normal fares.

**Island Rover Passes** (passengers £55/79, vehicles £259/388; consecutive days 8/15) cover the whole system and are good value if you want to see a lot of islands fast. Bicycles travel free on this pass.

**BUS Citylink** (☎0871 266 33 33; [www.citylink.co.uk](http://www.citylink.co.uk)) is the major intercity bus operator. Most local bus transport is operated by **Stagecoach** ([www.stagecoachbus.com](http://www.stagecoachbus.com)).

**TRAIN Scotrail** (☎08457 55 00 33; [www.scotrail.co.uk](http://www.scotrail.co.uk)) runs three north-south lines, including the spectacular West Highland line, running from Glasgow to Fort William with a branch to Oban. Another line runs from Glasgow and Edinburgh (via Stirling) to Perth, Pitlochry and Inverness; the third line goes from Perth to Dundee and Aberdeen, then northwest via Elgin to Inverness. Fife also has a rail network. See individual towns for transport details.

The **Central Scotland Rover** pass allows unlimited travel (for three days out of seven) between Edinburgh and Glasgow and the Fife and Stirling areas. It costs £35 and is available from all train stations. Similarly, the **Highland Rover** pass (£79) allows travel on four days out of eight and includes Oban, Aberdeen and buses on Mull.

## STIRLING REGION

Covering Scotland's wasplike waist, this region has always been a crucial strategic point dividing the Lowlands from the Highlands. For this reason, Scotland's two most important independence battles were