

Ben Nevis & Glen Coe

Two of Scotland's most famous place names, especially among walkers – Ben Nevis and Glen Coe – come to life in the southwestern Highlands. Ben Nevis, the highest mountain in Britain, dramatically overlooks the town of Fort William, while magnificent Glen Coe provides an awesome approach to an area graced by some of the most spectacular mountain scenery, and many of the finest walks, in the country.

In this chapter we describe three day walks to illustrate the wide variety of opportunities in the area. The ascent of 'the Ben' follows the main Mountain Track, where you will probably join many other 'pilgrims' and enjoy the camaraderie that soon develops between walkers. You're much less likely to have company along the low-level, historic Road to the Isles, through some of the remotest reaches of the area and following in the footsteps of long-gone cattle drovers. Then there's an exploration of perhaps the most distinctive of the many memorable peaks in Glen Coe, Buachaille Etive Mór, guarding the eastern entrance to the spectacular glen.

The northern half of the West Highland Way linking Glasgow and Fort William, Scotland's most popular long-distance walk, finishes in fine style through the region; you'll find a full description on p418. Fort William is definitely a walker's town and justifiably promotes itself as Scotland's Outdoor Capital. We hope these walks inspire you to linger and explore the area more fully.

HIGHLIGHTS

- Summitting **Ben Nevis** (p360), Britain's highest mountain and, on a good day, being treated to one of the finest views anywhere
- Following the historic **Road to the Isles** (p365) from remote Rannoch Moor to beautiful Steall Meadows and secluded Nevis gorge
- Exploring the lofty ridge and peaks of **Buachaille Etive Mór** (p370), the sentinel guarding the eastern entrance to Glen Coe

INFORMATION

When to Walk

Snow is a factor to be reckoned with to a much greater extent in this area than elsewhere in Scotland. However, by mid- to late May all but the highest reaches of Ben Nevis should be snow-free. At the other end of the season, expect light to moderate snowfalls from late October onwards.

Maps & Books

OS Landranger 1:50,000 map No 41 *Ben Nevis* covers all the walks in this chapter. Details of larger-scale maps are given in the Planning section for each walk.

Walks Fort William by John and Tricia Wombell describes 26 varied walks in the area. *Ben Nevis and Glen Coe* by Chris Townsend also has a good selection of routes. Alternatively, for mountain enthusiasts, there's Nick Williams' Pocket guide *Central Highlands*, which covers the Glen Coe area, among others.

Information Sources

The website www.outdoorcapital.co.uk is a rich source of information about a huge range of outdoor activities, while www.visithighlands.com is the site to visit for accommodation bookings.

GATEWAYS

Fort William (p362) is far and away the largest town in the region. It's well served by daily Scottish Citylink bus services from Glasgow, Edinburgh and Portree on the Isle of Skye, daily First ScotRail trains from Glasgow and the *Caledonian Sleeper* service from London (daily except Saturday).

Glencoe is only other place of any size in the region but it could scarcely be called a transport hub, and isn't on the train line.

BEN NEVIS

Duration	6–8 hours
Distance	9 miles (14.5km)
Difficulty	moderate–demanding
Start/Finish	Ionad Nibheis Visitor Centre
Nearest Towns	Fort William (p362), Glen Nevis (p363)
Transport	bus
Summary	A steep, stony path and a long day to the summit of Britain; an immensely rewarding walk with unsurpassed views.

There's something irresistible about climbing a country's highest peak, and hordes of walkers are drawn to Ben Nevis (1344m). The Ben tempts visitors with minimal, if any, walking experience and many discover they have taken on more than they expected. The mountain is a compelling presence above Fort William, often cloud-capped, and displaying a rugged profile from any and every viewpoint. The ascent is bound to be one of the more memorable events in any walker's career, so it's worth allowing a few days during which to stage your climb, to allow for the fickle weather.

Despite, or perhaps because of its dangers, the mountain has a colourful history. During the summers of 1881 and 1882 one Clement Wragge, soon nicknamed 'the inclement rag', made a daily ascent of the Ben to take weather measurements for the Scottish Meteorological Society. In 1883 a weather observatory was built on the summit (it's now a ruin); today's path from Glen Nevis, known as the Mountain Track, follows the pony track constructed at the same time to supply the observers. The observatory closed in 1904 but a small hotel annexe continued in business during

BEN NEVIS – AN EXTREME CLIMATE

Not surprisingly, the weather on Britain's highest mountain can be the most extreme in the country. The temperature on the summit is typically 9°C colder than at the foot of the mountain, and this figure doesn't take wind chill into account. An average of 261 gales per year rip across the summit and wind speeds well in excess of 100mph have often been recorded.

Even if skies are clear when you set out, don't be complacent, as the weather can turn arctic all too quickly. The mean annual summit temperature is below 0°C and snow often lies on the mountain until early summer; the summit is only a couple of hundred feet below the level of the permanent snow line. If the views are superb, count yourself lucky – on average the top is cloud-covered six days out of seven.