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  www.assynt.info
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), a really useful offshoot of VisitScotland.

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