

Mustard's Moidart Meanderings

The Moidart, Ardnamurchan and Morvern areas of Lochaber have some wonderful walking. Some of it is easy – much of it is pretty hard. Some of the mountains are close on 3000 feet, but we have no Munros. Wainwright once commented that 'I have less to say about the country south of the Mallaig railway' 'there is not even a single Munro to look at and admire.' Well, good for that grumpy old misogynist because it is partly the lack of Munros that make the area so special – we have no tiresome people dashing up the hills to tick them off in a notebook, and, unlike the Ben Nevis area, the mountains, glens and coastal paths are wonderfully free of binge walkers.

The Memsahib and I are keen walkers: we're the ones you'll see scurrying away when you come round the corner so that we don't have to smile and say 'Hello'. I'm the one who was taking a pee on the top of Rois Bheinn, secure in the knowledge that the nearest humans were two miles away, when seven people came marching over the immediate ridge in line abreast. We're the ones who loosely belong to a local walking group but rarely take part because we can't stand walking with our friends.

I should also warn you now that although the walks described in this book are genuine and thoroughly enjoyable, the text is not always politically-correct.

Wander the empty land around here and you come across volcanoes that turned the land into treacle fifty-five million years ago, give or take a month or two, Golden and White-tailed Eagles, seals, porpoise and dolphins, otters just about everywhere, Red Squirrels, so many Red Deer that they are a serious road hazard (especially in the rutting season), steam trains (but only in the running season), cleared or abandoned villages which tell a complex and often sad tale of the social history of the area. There are lots of stories, some true and some entertainingly daft, about Bonnie Prince Charlie and his antics, which didn't always please the locals.

If you're the kind of person who throws a wobbly as soon as you've gone into the woods and can no longer see your car, don't read on - this book isn't for you - just pop it into the charity shop next time you're passing. If you have uncontrollable children, go no further unless you want them to fall over a cliff. But if you're someone who wants to see a bit further than the edge of the road or the bagpipers in the tourist traps, if you don't mind getting a bit muddy or wet, and if you want to be somewhere where you can hear nothing but silence (we'll ignore the passing RAF Tornados for now) then read on.

Let's get on with it – please read some wise words about local conditions and customs, as well as reading a bit about Scottish legislation which will illustrate to folk from south of the border just how professionally you've been fooled by the English Open Access rules.

Col. Mustard

The Serious Bit

Conditions for walking here in Moidart and Ardnamurchan vary from the sublimely easy to the extremely hard - and the weather is equally variable. Conditions can change very rapidly and without warning, especially in the mountains, and you must be prepared for this. Walkers die in these hills, quite regularly, so don't take silly risks.

Go properly equipped with good footwear (boots or walking shoes - going on the hills in unsuitable footwear is asking for a broken ankle).

Air temperature drops by one degree Celsius for every five hundred feet of altitude - that's a six degree difference at the top of some of our local hills, so carry warm clothing - multiple layers are better than one heavy item. Take waterproof jackets and trousers - even on a dry day they can provide much-needed wind protection - and have gloves and hats handy, even in summer.

Pack food and drink - water is best, since tea and coffee have a dehydrating effect.

Midges have a bad press, but they can be an occasional nuisance on still, humid days, so don't forget the "midge stuff" (Avon Skin-so-Soft is an excellent alternative to those preparations that melt your eyeballs).

Take a map, and if you're going into wild country (that's just about everywhere around here, where many paths need a good imagination), a compass - and know how to use both. GPS is useful to pinpoint your position, but only if you can read a map as well - and only if the batteries work. And GPS doesn't work in the woods.

Distances

Distances on the hills are better measured in hours rather than miles, and, in cold winter conditions, everywhere takes at least twice as long. In winter, it only gets light at nine and it is dark by three-thirty ... plan accordingly and take a reliable torch.

Tell someone where you are going and when you expect to be back. The Police around here will give you a special form in case you can't work out what to say for yourself. Don't put your trust in mobile phones to get you out of trouble - they don't usually work in the hills.

Dogs

Dogs are **never** welcome if they're off the lead and not closely controlled. Yes, yes, I know your wee Fang wouldn't hurt a fly, but the sheep don't know that, do they?

Deer stalking brings substantial benefits to the local economy. The stalking season is from 1st July to 15th February and September and October are the busiest months. Deer stalking shouldn't take place on Sundays. Check locally before you walk - estate staff are always willing to advise on safe walking areas on particular days.

Remember, dressed in your brown waxed jacket and wearing that hilarious hat with the big ears on it that Auntie Maisie bought you last Christmas, you look just like a hostile Red Deer to an American in brand-new combat gear peering through the rifle-scope on his double-barreled Kalashnikov machine gun from a mile away. Friendly fire, eh?

A Right to Roam - the Scottish Outdoor Access Code

Scotland has long had a tradition of open walking and this has now been formalised in the Land Reform (Scotland) Act 2003. This established the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, commonly known as the Right to Roam and which came into force in February 2005. Unlike England and Wales, the Scottish system does not have defined areas where you are allowed to roam free in a patronising sort of a way - in Scotland you can walk more or less anywhere, but you must do so intelligently and with consideration. You can find detailed information at <http://www.outdooraccess-scotland.com>. Culturally, the Scottish attitude to land use, having developed with the non-feudal clan system, is pleasantly different to the rest of the U.K. and most landowners have a very positive approach to walkers if one observes the common courtesies.

In a nutshell, the code is based on three common-sense principles:

- 1. Respect other people.**
Acting with courtesy, consideration and awareness is all-important. Make sure that you respect the privacy, safety and livelihoods of those living or working in the outdoors, and the needs of other people enjoying the outdoors.
- 2. Care for the environment.**
Look after the places you visit and enjoy, and leave the land as you find it.
- 3. Take responsibility for your own actions.**
Remember that the outdoors cannot (and should not) be made risk-free, and act with care at all times for your own safety and that of others.

Quaint local customs

Driving

Believe it or not, we have excellent local transport links, especially when compared to other regions of Britain. The local bus firm, Shiel Buses, goes practically everywhere. But if you can't tear yourself away from the faithful Austin Allegro you'll find that driving around here is different from Guildford or Kilmarnock. We have some rather narrow roads with passing places. These passing places are not parking bays, nor are they merely to allow traffic coming the other way to squeeze past – they're also amazingly useful for letting that local driver behind you overtake, lowering his blood pressure as he comes tearing up with his headlights on and a despairing look on his face. You might be on holiday – but remember that not everyone else is.

And say 'thank you' – a cheery wave is always appreciated if people pull over for you or let you by.

Pubs and hotels

Don't complain about the beer not being to your liking. It's almost impossible to keep up here for long because there isn't a huge population of drinkers. The phrase 'Oh darling, they don't have any decent English beer' could mean you'll end up thirsty. You can trust me about this – I've heard it said.

People around here eat early – it's often difficult to find food after 8.30 or 9.00 at night.

Mobile phones

There are few things more entertaining to a local than watching the city folk wandering round in circles, desperately prodding a mobile phone. Leave it in the car. You're here to enjoy yourself.

Mountain Rescue

You're lucky. You're in the area covered by the busiest trauma unit (Fort William's Belford Hospital) and Mountain Rescue team in Britain. The Mountain Rescue do it for love – so don't make stupid requests. They've had people asking for helicopter rescues because they were tired – they've had calls from clowns on the crowded Ben Nevis tourist trail because it was 'too open'. Dial 999 and ask for Mountain Rescue ONLY if you really are in a fix, otherwise you may learn some new words.

Start Walking

How difficult are these walks?

The walks in this book are all within the scope of the average fit walker. Most could be done in his sleep by my cat Archie. A major advantage of Moidart is that there are no Munros (mountains over 3000 feet) in the area. Munros attract walkers because they often have a well-worn path, sometimes metalled, and they can be ticked off in a book ... h'm. You will see very few other people on these walks; other advantages are the lack of litter, and the blissful silence ... you can often hear nothing but your heartbeat.

RAF Tornados and Eurofighters, not to mention other NATO aircraft, often pass by at low altitude and with the 'go faster' button pressed. Do not be alarmed unless they make you fall over.

1. Smirisary and Whitesands, near Genuig.

A splendid, varied and interesting walk in all weathers. Wild cliff scenery, an old, partly-reclaimed deserted crofting village, rocky beaches pounded by the sea and, at Whitesands, a beautiful white sandy beach (as you'd expect) with myriads of shells. There is prolific wildlife: Common Seals, Great Northern Divers and Buzzards are all regularly seen and you may well see porpoise and otters. In high moorland glens in this area in mid-summer you may see huge Hummingbird Hawk moths hunting.

The going is steep and rocky in places down the well-trodden paths to Smirisary and it can be muddy anywhere. Beyond Smirisary, to Whitesands, there is for the most part a good path which in places gives the feeling of great space without being too vertiginous.

There are often sheep, who won't like your dog.

Turn off the A861 at Genuig, pass the Genuig Inn, and take the narrow road past Samalaman House and up into the Wild Lands until you come to a wide parking space on the left (NM776656), a couple of hundred metres before the end of the road.

Walk the 200 metres or so to the turning space at the end of the public road (you won't have parked there, since you're too intelligent - otherwise you wouldn't be reading this). Go down the hill a few yards and through the gate on the right. Cross the open field, bearing left to pass in front of the cottage, and go through the next gate. This is the last gate on to the open hills, so leave it securely shut.

Follow the track up a gentle hill, a track which can turn into a small burn after rain.

Beyond the trees, a path goes off to the left by a small cairn. Go straight ahead, however, and stop at the top of the hill (where there may well be a wooden seat) to take in the breathtaking view - on a clear day, you can see, from the left: Ardnamurchan Point, the most westerly spot on the British mainland, then sweeping round to the right, Muck, Eigg and behind it the Cuillins of Rum. On a good day you can see the jagged Skye Cuillins peeping up beyond the Arisaig peninsula over on the right. The Memsahib and I have seen clouds of seabirds diving into the water here, often a sign of the presence of porpoise or whales.

When you've drunk in the view, carry on carefully down a steep rocky path. Ruined cottages come into view below as you descend into the old clachan, or village, of Smirisary.

The crofting community of Smirisary in the early 1940s was described in Margaret Leigh's book, 'A Spade Among The Rushes', which is still in print, and was inhabited until well after the second world war. Several of the old black houses have been renovated and are used as holiday homes, and if you like getting back to basics, these are for you, although there is no electricity or mains water, and supplies and rubbish have to be carried in and out on foot.

Going directly towards the beach from the bottom of the hill path, go down to the right of the walled field to explore the rocky foreshore. The geology here is fantastic; igneous intrusions of lava dykes, standing high above the ground, run down to the sea, and nearer to the sea the rocks have been

violently contorted and finally stood on end to form a natural seawall.

Boats from Lochailort were used to supply everything to Smirisary before the building of a road from Lochailort to Kinlochmoidart in 1967, and the remains of the unsheltered harbour can be traced as a broken low dockside and a flat rocky area cleared of big boulders, which was the slipway.

This is a spot for lingering, exploring the rocks, counting the myriad wildflowers and wandering around the old village, without bothering the residents with daft questions. The really old houses can be identified by the rounded corners of the walls, designed to cut down on wind noise, although we all know that the real reason was that the Devil couldn't hide round a rounded corner. Below the brown basalt cliff to the north of the junction of the path coming down from the hill, you can find a ruined corn-drying kiln.

When you've done all this, you may be exhausted (I usually am), so the walk can easily be cut short.

For the shortcut, go round to the east from the rocky beach and cross the marshy area to the north to gain the meadow where sheep will probably be grazing. This would have been the community 'in-bye', used for arable crops, and in older times livestock would have been excluded by a simple low wall – this would contain small black cattle, and at that time there were no sheep. Large heaps of stones testify to the clearance of this meadow for barley and spuds. Find your way up towards the left hand side of the meadow, passing up the hill to the right of the lowest cottage, and then go round behind it and to the left of the next one up, where you will find a path which will take you up through pleasant woodland and back to the cairn you passed earlier.

You hardier roughy-toughy types should gather up your picnic and cross the marshy area to its north-east corner. This can be done in relative dryness by finding your way to the biggest cottage in the village, tucked around the corner from the southern end of the beach, and following the narrow board-walk across the boggy bit towards the meadow.

The path to Whitesands starts at the eastern end of this board-walk, where it is usually sign-posted along a natural rock outcrop. Follow this path, which can be indistinct at certain times of the year; as it winds its way through the rocks and emerges high above the coast. It wanders into a little ravine - which is a bit vertical, so put the kids on leads - and crosses a waterfall coming down from the old summer pastures high above, then continues out of the ravine, with exquisite views down to the exposed shore.

Suddenly, after dropping down through a narrow gully, the path drops onto a pebble-strewn raised beach, a relic of the Ice Age and an indicator of sea level changes since those times. Built against the low cliffs on the seaward side as you emerge on to this open area are the remains of an old building, and the path meanders its way down to a sublime grass-topped peninsula, with white sand to the north and a shell-covered beach to the south, where the sea is often warm and calm enough for a dip. The islands just offshore are a favourite hauling-out spot for Common Seals, which are in fact the less-common of the two British species.

There is a cave formed by two rock walls a little further around the shoreline, which has been partially-walled, presumably to form a shelter; and this can be useful cover on a showery day.

The walk finishes here for most folk and you should return by the way you came.

For an even-longer walk, it is possible to follow the coast further round into the North Channel between the mainland and Eilean Shona, and if the tide is falling you can walk out onto the wide beach which becomes exposed, largely composed of maerl beds. Maerl, a coralline algae, is a rarity, composed of the broken chalky external skeleton of a marine plant, and is the reason this whole sea area is a Special Area of Conservation (SAC). On this beach, you often also find big sea-urchin shells. The presence of soft orange, green and yellow sponges are proof that the seas around here are warmed, albeit ever-so-gently, by an offshoot of the Gulf Stream, the North Atlantic Drift.

Don't attempt to continue further around the channel in the hope of making a round walk; I've tried it and unless you swim it, or can walk on water, it can't be done. The barnacle-covered cliffs fall sheer into the channel, and the beach is covered by up to five metres of water at high tide.

While you're passing back through Genuig, find out what's on at the Village Hall, one of the best venues in the west of Scotland, where local and international artists perform a wide variety of music

from Gaelic folk to high opera.

About five miles in all, allow three hours plus dawdling time.

The Silver Walk (1) The round walk version

A lovely round walk with outstanding views across inland and sea lochs. It is a five mile round route which is not for the faint-hearted. It circles Cruach nan Meann ... there is one vertiginous, but safe, ledge on the return leg and in winter it can all be hard going.

This walk starts from the car-park for Castle Tioram, reached off the A861 just north of Shiel Bridge, by Acharacle. I think it's best to do this anti-clockwise by first walking back up the road The Square at Doirlinn, the way you drove in. Alternatively you can park in the layby by the wooden bungalow south of The Square and do the road bit afterwards.

Cross the stile on the left just after the wooden bungalow.

Follow the path steeply up through the woods, alongside the water pipe, manufactured (as it says on a spare bit near the top) in 1946. High above this path, well to the left, is Clanranald's Rock or Seat, where legend has it that the Chief of the Clanranalds sat and watched his ancestral home at Castle Tioram burn, after he had put it to the torch to prevent its capture during the 1715 risings. At the dam at the top of the hill, follow the path to the left above the loch. At the far end of the loch, go up through the obvious gap and as the path goes down the other side, take the left fork around the hill, leaving the second loch (Lochan na Fola) below you to the right. The track to the right drops down to the A861 at the Blain Burn and is another way in, but the left fork takes you up the hill and over the plateau to the north. As the path begins to fall slightly, there is a cairn slightly off the track to the left which marks a lost path down through the deserted village of Briaig, the substantial ruins of which are visible, spread across the hillside. Stay on the main path, then go down more steeply leaving the old village well to your left.

As you plod down the track, which gets a bit vague and very soggy in places, look down and across over the silver waters of Loch Moidart (a hoard of English silver Elizabethan coins was certainly discovered around here by the Victorians, hence the name of the walk, I think, although there's always a story about buried treasure around here), you come to a small cairn and a transverse path. Turn left, following the path above and sometimes alongside the loch. The way can be hard going, over several small clapper bridges, but the views of Loch Moidart are worth it. One of the biggest heronries in Scotland is in this area and they can often be seen in groups on the shores and reefs.

A mile or so from the cairn there is a large area of flat rocks just off the path on the lochside, perfect for a picnic. Beyond this, the track continues to be rocky, and there is one slightly vertiginous section where the path runs along a narrow ledge on the cliff face, a few feet above the water. The iron safety railings fitted in Victorian times are mostly gone and care is needed for twenty metres or so.

As the channel narrows, a large rock on the foreshore, just as the path begins to curve left, is the perfect spot to view the romantic ruin of Castle Tioram (pronounced 'Cheerum'), the 13th century ancestral home of the Clan Ranalds, on its tidal island. The castle is now in private hands and internal access is not permitted at the time of writing, although you can go around the outside. If you cross to the island, beware of the tide, which comes in silently and very swiftly and fills your boots very quickly, as I can testify.

Return along the shoreline (loads of oyster shells on the beach) to the car park.

About six miles. Three and a half hours without a picnic.

The Silver Walk (2) The original two-car version

For a change, start from the Blain Bridge on the A861, at NM679694, where there is easy parking off the road. The other car should be left at the start of the Silver Walk above, a couple of hundred metres south of Doirlinn Square, or in the Castle Tioram car park.

Local tradition has it that many years ago, road-menders uncovered a body wearing a red soldier's uniform here, and hastily buried it. There are also believed to be several milestones which were buried at the start of the second world war following the government's apparent belief that Germany hadn't bought copies of all the Ordnance Survey maps in 1938 !

Go through the gate and follow the good track up the hill. Those with sharp eyes will spot the remains of an abandoned village on the left beyond Torr nan Muc (Pig's Hill). The really sharp-eyed will see the corn-kiln right by the track.

The track climbs quite gently for a mile or so to Loch Blain, where Red-throated Divers sometimes can be seen. Cross a stile and follow the path along the top of the dammed edge of Lochan na Fola, then over another stile and beneath a splendid stand of Scots Pines. At the far end on Lochan na Fola you'll come across the main Silver Walk, coming from ahead and going to the right. Ahead takes you back to Doirlinn Square, where the main Silver Walk (above) starts – to the right puts you firmly on the main return loop of the Silver Walk back to Castle Tioram.

The Silver Walk (3) The new two-car version

This walk is a linear walk with a long stretch along the shore of Loch Moidart, taking in a path created by Forest Enterprise in 2007. It is relatively-sheltered if the weather is not so good. There is a very stiff short climb and it uses the last stage of the Silver Walk (1) above, although you could combine it with the Silver Walk (2) instead.

Start at the Forestry Commission car park at Ardmolich wood, towards the top of Drynie Hill south of Kinlochmoidart on the A861. Although there is bags of room, there is so much stupid parking here that I despair – so park considerably and leave the turning-space clear.

Follow the well-made path down through the woods, looking for Red Squirrels, who adore this woodland. If you see a squirrel, it will be a Red one – please report it to the Highland Red Squirrel Group at www.highlandredsquirrel.co.uk.

The path, with some beautiful mosses and lichens beside it, crosses a deer fence by a huge stile. Follow the path as it starts to climb gently, and then becomes very steep indeed until it levels out with superb views across Loch Moidart, and a welcome bench to sit on. Next it drops gently and forks – take the right fork (the left fork takes you up out of the woods, high above the loch, and is itself a lovely walk). After a couple of hundred metres the path splits again – take the right fork down towards the shore, go through the ingenious self-closing deer gate, and follow the path as it runs along the shore of the loch to the ruins of the village of Port a' Bhata. The first ruin you may see, to the left as the path opens into a meadow, is the old mill, which still contains a broken quern stone: behind it are the remains of a turf embankment which once supported a leet which fed water to the mill-wheel. Beyond this you will come to the village itself. More details can be found at the Moidart History Group website at www.moidart.org.uk.

Continue through the village and climb steadily until, high above the water, you see a small cairn at the junction of a faint path coming down the hill from your left. This is the Silver Walk – continue straight on to get to Castle Tioram, or go left to go to the Blain Bridge.

The Ardnish Peninsula.

A hard in-and-out walk.

A lovely, satisfying there-and-back walk starts from the big lay-by to the east of the A830 Mallaig road just south of Polish (OS 742836). Beware though, it is a long one. There is a bothy at the end of the walk where you can stay the night, free; there are no facilities or supplies but it is dry and windproof.

Cross the stile by the layby and make your way south-west until you pick up the narrow path as it drops down before crossing the railway line by a sign which says 'No vehicles', which is rather odd since the concrete of the bridge roadway drops two feet, quite vertically, to the path. The Jacobite steam trains from Fort William to Mallaig come this way in summer; the trains are very nostalgic and you might get a friendly toot from the driver.

The path crosses a wide glen then climbs very steeply over the shoulder of Cruach an Fherainn Dubh, with wonderful views of Loch nan Uamh. Across the loch to the north is the spot where the Jacobite Charles Stuart, the Young Pretender, landed from a French frigate in 1745, and from where he left again in 1746.

It's tough going up the hill on giant steps because much of the original paved path has deteriorated, but at the top it levels out and has an almost glacial feel to it, with the sandstone underfoot scoured bare by the ice in places. Next, you come to an ancient stone causeway, with Loch Doire' a' Ghearrain on the left, then drop steadily down on a good paved path through mixed woodland and across a wide, drained area to the ruined village of Peanmeanach. The walkers' bothy at Peanmeanach, which stands in a line of ruined cottages, is maintained by the Mountain Bothies Association of Peterborough.

Further on are the old settlements of Glasnacardoch, to the west, where the large ruined building is the old village school, and Laggan, to the east. There are two more substantial old settlements, Slochd at the end of the peninsula, and Mullochbuie, halfway back to your starting point but down the brae to the north.

A few hundred metres to the west of Peanmeanach are the Ardnish Singing Sands, two beautiful white beaches looking across Loch Ailort to Goat Island and Genuig. On Goat Island are two vitrified neolithic forts - the island is well worth a visit if you have the use of a boat.

The entire peninsula (indeed, the entire area for miles around) was cleared during the second world war for special forces' training, and except for one holiday cottage at Laggan, Ardnish is nowadays totally uninhabited, since no-one returned after the war except a single shepherd who left Mullochbuie in the 1950s.

Return by the same route, or climb the northern ridge and follow it to join the path at the top of Cruach an Fherainn Dubh, which is very tough walking indeed but worth it.

Eight miles altogether. Allow four hours in, four out.

Bheinn Rois

A really serious mountain trek. You shouldn't attempt this even in good weather without a map, preferably the right one, and a compass, preferably working.

Park well off the road on the wide verge east of the bridge near Roshven Farm.

More or less opposite the road entrance to Roshven Farm is the route up to the top of Bheinn Rois. It might look innocent but this is a big, rough mountain, only a couple of crags short of a Munro, but unlike a Munro, it doesn't have an easy well-trodden path up it – in fact it has no path at all, so it's hard. Do it only if you're properly equipped.

The mountain is a Corbett (between 2500 and 3000 feet) and the Scottish Mountaineering Club guidebook gives an approach from the west, by the Ardery burn. However, we're doing it from Roshven Farm.

From the bridge over the Irin Burn, walk east for about twenty or so metres; a muddy little path leads up the bank to the south, where there may be a map telling you all about deer-stalking. Follow the path, going through the gate and then, to be frank, just shamble up, following the fairly imaginary ATV track up the lower slopes. As usual on mountain climbs, that hilltop ahead of you repeatedly reveals another when you get to the top of it. Low down, in summer, the ground is covered in the infamous Moidart tussock grass, which is thigh-deep and dreadful, but this doesn't last very long.

One good route, once you're up the lower slopes at about 250m, is to traverse (that's a hardy mountaineer's word for 'wander round') to the left to the Allt Lagan a' Chaltuinne burn and then follow it up – it has some gorgeous little waterfalls – until you climb on to the shoulder somewhere around NM735777. Follow the shoulder east up to reach the summit. The first summit isn't quite the highest but it has the best views, which on a good day are stunning. The southerly summit (with the bits of lightning-blasted O.S. trigonometry point) is slightly higher.

Around the 500m mark you may come across Ptarmigan, white in winter, colourful in summer, which are sometimes surprisingly unconcerned by people, which is a pity because they can get shot. Rois Bheinn often has Golden Eagles patrolling the summit ridge, and the Memsahib and I have seen Merlins lower down.

In good weather you can return off the west face down to the top of the Allt a' Gleann Dubh, which is a very steep grassy scramble and, needing a lot of care, is for experienced folk only, then north straight down the glen to just short of a sheep fence – take the gate on the left, go steeply down to the junction of two burns at NM721776. Cross both burns and climb up the hill (overgrown, wet and muddy) to gain a stalker's track which takes you down by the Irine Burn to the road and the car. If the burn is in spate, do not attempt the crossing – return to the gate, turn down the glen to another gate in the fence ahead of you and find your way back to the starting point.

Wainwright said there weren't any hills worth climbing south of the Fort William-Mallaig road, but you will know by now that he was just plain wrong.

The Singing Sands

A good there-and-back walk. Beware of unexploded mortar bombs and other world war two souvenirs in the sand dunes – seriously, if you find any, report them to the Polis. This is one of the useful things you can do with a GPS. When I had to do it, my batteries packed in.

To get there, go north from Acharacle on the A861 and take the Kentra turn by the church, later turning for Arivegaig, where there is a car park near the shore. (NM650677). Walk over the wooden bridge and continue on a stony track for about two miles, watching out for birds on Kentra Bay. Eventually you get to a deer-fence, climbing over it by a big stile then a couple of miles further on dropping down a sign-posted path on the right to a lovely, lonely beach backed by dunes. These are the Singing Sands - coarse-grained sand which moans eerily in the right wind conditions, or if you scuff it with your feet. Return by the same route.

About seven miles in all.

Rhu

Several strolls.

Drive to Arisaig and turn left in the village. From this road, at the back of Arisaig Bay (OS 640854), we counted seventeen seals at Christmas 1996. Follow the road to its end at Rhu, which used to be the ferry-boarding point for the Small Isles (Eigg, Muck and Rum) before they worked out the way into Arisaig. There are lots of pleasant pottery strolls around the coast just here.

Laudale and Cripesdale

A long and challenging round walk.

Drive to Loch Sunart and then through Strontian, turning right on the Lochaline road across the head of Loch Sunart. The road heads back westward down the far side of the loch; as it veers inland, turn left (signposted Laudale) and park just beyond the pier on the left.

This is a round walk best done clockwise so you don't get too lost in the forestry operations later on. Follow the track; it crosses the beach across the front of Laudale House, with its deer herd. Beyond Laudale the cottage in the field on your left as the road turns slightly inland was deserted in 1926 after the family was wiped out by smallpox and has been deserted since ... spooky, eh? Further on, the track divides ... you go left, up the hill, over Gearr Chragg and past lonely Lochan Donnachaion, where you'll see the first of the Victorian stones seats this route is known for. There are Golden Eagles in these hills and white-tailed Eagles are not uncommon, coming over from Mull. Follow the track, and the seats, descending through blanket forestry until you meet a good forestry track, where, whatever it says on the map, it is best to turn right and reach Loch Sunart. At the pier by the loch, harvested wood is sometimes taken off by barge; hence the signs on the road going OUT banning heavy vehicles. Follow the long track parallel to the loch edge back to the car.

Fifteen miles, a good eight or nine hours.

Glen Moidart

A haunting there-and-back walk in a 'cleared' glen. A real slurpy slog if it's wet.

Drive past Kinlochmoidart on the A861, turning to Brunery by the Bailey bridge over the river, hastily assembled in 2005 to replace a 1960s model that was swept away after a storm – the stone 'Telford' bridge, built in the 1850s, is still here. Continue as far as you can up the lane, perhaps two miles, crossing the hump-backed bridge and continuing; there is a car park at the driveable limit.

The first part of the walk is a stony track through a wide glen with towering cliffs, with a lochan to the left. There are Red Deer all over this glen; in the October rut the stags roar constantly.

Ignore the first footbridge across the river, walking to the second, wooden, bridge just before the road forks; the right fork goes up to a reservoir and it's a worthwhile diversion to go up to it. The reservoir was built to control the level of the fishing lochan below. The village here, signs of which are all around, was deserted long before the dam was built.

Come back down, cross the bridge and as you leave the bridge strike out ahead and slightly right, aiming to leave the fence round the little wood just to your right. The path then mounts the crests of the glacial moraine to cross the bog ahead of you.

Follow to the far side, turning right along the track, made muddy by six-wheel ATVs driving up and down (off-roaders are bad news to a delicate environment ... here's the proof). The old track is often just a few yards north of the muddy one and is much drier.

The first deserted village is Inchrory; the second, with not only early ruins but one that has been rebuilt and is falling down again, is Assary. Good spots here for picnics by the waterfalls. The southern shoulder of Bheinn Rois is just north of Assary.

This is a classic glacial valley, with hanging valleys, moraines (including a huge one just east of Assary) and erratics everywhere.

Return by same route, although the route over the top and back down to Roshven is on the list for an overnight investigation.

Assary and back is about seven miles including diversions, say three to four hours.

Ben Hiant

A surprisingly easy mountain (and only about 550m) with unparalleled views over the Hebrides and Ardnamurchan.

This is a fabulous walk on a clear day. Take the road to Kilchoan, passing through Glenborrodale, past Camus na Gael car-park. Camus na Gael has both a neolithic and a Georgian burial ground in it, as well a deserted village on the hillside to the west, with ruins on the shore. There is also a beautiful slipway, where I once almost trod on an otter.

Leaving the car park, the road turns inland, contours around the steep hillside and then ascends a long hill up a haunting glen. At the very top, off to the right, is a short track with an obvious quarry at the end of it. Park here without blocking the track, which is in constant use. Take binoculars, a camera, and a compass.

Walk back, cross the road and take the faint path immediately opposite. Go over the hump then up, heading as high as you can see, which isn't very far at this point, on a compass bearing of about 255° (westish). At the false top a set of crags loom ahead; aim for the first dip from the right, following the path; it turns left across the top of a shallow valley. Leave the path, on 255° again, up and over heading towards the left of the dark peaty cliffs ahead of you. If in doubt, bear left, but you will eventually come across a good path; just take care not to fall in the bog bursts you may come across – the Memsahib has been unamused by such capers. Follow the path to your left; it climbs the airy summit ridge of Ben Hiant, all the way, ascending quickly but surprisingly gently.

The views get better as you go on; the Hebrides as far as Coll and Tiree, Ardnamurchan, Mull, Skye and Moidart. Bheinn Rois is easily seen. Way below you may hear red deer roaring in October; above you may see buzzard.

As you approach the very last crag, (you can see the trig point nearly all the way once you are on the path) don't make the mistake of following the faint path to the right, round and up a hill which looks horrendously dangerous, because that is a path which *is* horrendously dangerous, especially if it's wet or windy. Go left around the hill and approach the summit from the south along a gentle path which contours for a few hundred metres and then goes abruptly up a wide gully. Smashing stuff.

Return by the same way, or come steeply off the hill down to the east and trek back north along the bottom of the slopes.

Two to three hours up, two hours down.

Glen Mama

A delightful hike up a varied glen: waterfalls and lochs amongst the mountains: One burn to ford: trivial in good weather but can be very difficult after heavy rain.

Park off the A830 just south of Loch nan Uamh, a couple of hundred metres inland from the railway bridge. There are several places to park.

Take the obvious track which leads west from the road, over a cattle grid and down to Glen Mama Farm. Stay on the surfaced track past the front of the farm and where the track turns left away from the burn, turn right and cross it (channelled here) by the railway sleeper bridge.

Turn left and follow the burn for a few hundred metres then ford it where it breaks up into several channels. Look out for a well-worn path climbing the wooded hill to the left and going up the glen as it narrows. Follow this path as it becomes a stony track with the roaring waterfalls way below on the right.

At the brow of the hill, keep on the path for a couple of miles, in pleasant open country with a babbling burn and flowers and birds everywhere: I've heard a Corncrake here and seen Golden Eagles. Look carefully and you can see the remains of habitation and old lazy-beds.

On your right you will see the stepping stones crossing the burn: the path over the hill to the right leads back to Lochailort. Don't cross the river but follow it.

The sheep-fank you will come to was probably built using the stones from the old houses, which can be seen by going higher and north-east of the fank.

Carry on along the strath until you pass through a little gorge and see Loch Mama ahead.

The path runs along the side of the loch: you may discern a very-flattened stone circle is all about. It probably isn't what you might think, since it forms a large CND symbol. Ironically, we once watched Air Force One and Two flying over here on a stunning day, being refuelled by tankers – a fitting symbol, you might say.

Follow the path, which may need some imagination, until the river ends in a narrow bank and becomes Loch na Craig Dubh. Keep an eye out for unusual birdlife here. Follow the lochside along another imaginary path until you find the boathouse: the crag high above it, overlooking the loch, makes a smashing picnic site. In spring, the woods opposite are alive with cuckoos.

Return the same way, but this time, at the west end of Loch Mama, cross the burn by the big stepping stones and go left, picking up a faint westbound path (ATV tracks) at the far end of the little sandy beach. Follow this track over a low boggy hill, parallel to the burn, until it becomes a well-made track which will lead you back to the small stepping stones you saw earlier. Cross by these, or paddle, or go back a couple of hundred metres and jump across, depending on the weather, and return to the start the way you came.

An hour and a half out, an hour back.

Loch Beoraid and The Prince's Cave

Fabulous scenery and photographs

Park considerately at Arienskil, on the main A830 about two miles east of Lochailort. A longish climb but worth it. Not too wet – well, not really. Quite a lonely feeling to this walk but you're more likely to meet other walkers than most other walks in this guide, since it's a signposted right of way in to Loch Morar and some very remote walking indeed.

From the entrance to the drive to Craig Dubh (a private house) head straight for the culvert under the railway, following the obvious track round to the right and up the valley. It's a long steady climb but not too hard. When you reach the brow of the hill, the way becomes boggy and the path very faint. About a hundred metres to the left of the path, in December 1967, a Royal Air Force Shackleton crashed into the hillside after icing up, killing all thirteen crew members – you can still see the scar to the left of the track, where there is a commemorative plaque.

Returning to the path, aim ahead and slightly left and you will eventually find a high metal stile in the middle of a large pool of water, which is part of a long-gone boundary fence. Behind the stile is a low hill: keep close to this, with it on your left, and it will take you round to the point where the path plunges down some five hundred feet to the end of Loch Beoraid (pronounced Bee-or-ich).

Wonderful picnic spots abound overlooking the loch, and the stupendous crag on the right at the top makes terrific photographs.

Go down if you want but it's along way back up. Return by the same route.

Two hours up, one and a bit down.

The Three Old Maids.

A very steep climb up a Victorian path to fishing lochans way above Kinlochmoidart. The path is marked on the OS 1:25000 map.

Go to Kinlochmoidart on the A861 and turn left just before the river bridge, along the Brunery road. Half a mile along this road there is a wide turning on the right into the fish-farm hatchery. Park here (bags of room).

Cross the road to the north and go through two farm-gates, along the track, to what looks like a building but is in fact only a wall.

Turn left and follow the wet and slippy track, which goes behind the grounds of Kinlochmoidart House – turn neither right nor left but go on, up and up and up and up – it zig-zags right up the hill to Loch nam Paitean at 350m.

Before the top, as it begins to level out very slightly, you can leave the track, heading west across the hill, to the Three Old Maids – deliberately-placed rocks which provide a spectacular lookout post through the gap between them, looking right down on to Kinlochmoidart House and Loch Moidart.

At the top of the track, Loch nam Paitean is very atmospheric on a sunny winter's day with a drop of snow on the ground and ice covering the water.

Return the same way.

Kinlochmoidart to Roshven

This used to be the short cut from Roshven to Kinlochmoidart, before the modern road was built. It is a one-way walk and is best done by leaving a car at Brunery and another at Roshven Farm. This is a hard walk in remote country. It goes high and far into boggy and pathless terrain. You should not attempt this unless you understand the use of a compass, have a map and are properly equipped.

Start by doing the Three Old Maids walk, above. Go along the left (west) bank of Loch nam Paitchean and navigate your way due north by compass, going over wet and often boggy ground between a few lochans to find a metal stile, which usually sits in its own pond, on the line of an old fence which crosses west –east. Carry on due north to find an old stalker's path as it drops down the Irine Burn (lots of grand waterfalls) to Roshven Farm – it used to be the regular way between Roshven House and Kinlochmoidart House in the late 1800s.

Probably five hours.

A walk around Ardmolich Hill – terrific views.

The first part of this walk is trackless and rough. There are nearly always red deer around.

Park at the Forest Enterprise car-park three-quarters of the way up the hill on the A861 south of Kinlochmoidart.

Don't take the forest path but walk further up the road, then down to a dip - a couple of hundred metres beyond the car park. It's a bit overgrown but at the corner of the woods there's a wooden fence to climb over on to the open hill. (NM718712)

Go straight up the hill – there's an imaginary path and it can be wet and lush – it's fairly tussocky going.

At the top of the wood, bear right about 30 degrees and carry on to the highest point. From here there are stupendous views down on to Loch Sunart in both directions – up to Achnanellan and down to Acharacle.

Find the stock fence (marked on the map) and follow it north-west to Lochan bac na Sgitheic.

Cross the newish stock fence (unmarked on my map) at the northern corner of the lochan – the aim is to follow the old fence (which is marked on the map) to Lochan Feith Dhuinn, but the fence disappears after a couple of hundred metres – you can follow the faint hollow it used to be in, or you can take a direct bearing of 290 degrees, or you can stay high by circling round to the north until you get there – this avoids the worst bog and gives the best views.

To leave Lochan Feith Dhuinn, keep to its east side by the new deer fence, and cross the three metre-wide Allt an Feith Dhuinn – this requires faith (or stupidity) if you're as heavy as I am since you have to cross by hanging on the deer fence, shuffling feet along a wooden stretcher – the water was deeper than my walking pole this week. It's easy enough, though – just don't trust the obvious islands, because they're not islands! (The alternative would be to take the lochan to the west but it's quite a boggy trek)

Follow the deer fence – it turns north and down a gully, then turns east, and at this point there are lovely high views north-west over Loch Moidart, particularly if the tide is falling, and east straight up Glen Moidart to the falls of Glen Forslan, a classic hanging valley.

There's a stile over the fence here, just beyond the bits of blue rope tied to the wire (they'll still be there in twenty years). Cross this and immediately turn right, straight up to the highest point – there's a bit of forestry brush but go through it or round it.

Once on top, stroll eastwards along the wide open ridge and you'll pick up a faint footpath. Follow this path, which gets clearer and eventually becomes a well-made track, down through the woods – turn left at the first junction and ignore the next – (OR turn right and then right at the next, it ends up the same). It's a very very steep downhill track until the bottom, where it goes up again to the car park. This path was only made in 2003, the intention being to push it on to Port a' Bhata and join the Silver Walk, but the FE ran out of money.

Not very far – perhaps four miles, but a super walk with views very few people round here have seen.

A sassenach's guide to pronouncing the Gaelic.

I'm not going to go into this in depth, since I'm a sassenach myself, but to stop the locals howling with laughter every time you ask the way to anywhere, here are a few basic pronunciations, mainly place names. At the end is a glossary of useful words and phrases.

Common words

Gaelic, the language
Gaelic, the people
Ceilidh
Clachan
De thà dol?
Sassenach
Slainte

Pronounced

Galick. (In Ireland, they say 'Gaylick')
Gaylick. (In Ireland, they say 'us')
Kailie (it really means a meeting but nowadays is used for a dance)
Clackh-an (soft 'k') ... an old cottage.
Chay a toll? ... what's going on?
Sass-en-akh ... a foreigner of any sort, not necessarily English.
Slann-chuh ... 'cheers'.

Local place names

Acharacle
Ardgour
Ardnish, Polish
Beinn Rois
Ben Resipol
Glen Mama
Glenoig
Irene
Kilchoan
Lochailort
Lochaline
Moidart
Peanmeanich
Rois Bheinn
Salen
Samalaman
Smirisary
Strontian
Sunart
Tioram

Pronounced

Ah-aracle (the first 'c' is silent) Hence Ah-aracle.
Ard-gower
Ard-neesh, Pol-neesh
Ben Rosh
Ben Rezzipole
Glen Mammy
Glenoig
Aye-run
Kill-ho-an
Lock-eye-lirt
Lock-aah-linn
Moy-dart
Pin-min-ikh
Roshvun
Sahl-en
Take a deep breath. Sam-allah-man
Smur-iss-a-ree
Stron-tea-an
Soon-art
Cheeram

Glossary of useful words and phrases

English

A pint of bitter
A pint of Guinness
Highland Cattle
Red wine
Morrisons
A very large whisky
Cheers!
A wee dram with coffee in it
What's happening?

Local

A pint of 80 (or 70)
A pint of Guinness
Hairy Koos
New world red
Morrisons
A big dram
Slainte! ('slann-chuh')
Electric coffee
De thà dol? ('chay a toll?')