WALKING THE LONG-DISTANCE PATHS - MY WAY!

The West Highland Way
(Milngavie near Glasgow – Fort William (95 miles)

Most people who walk the West Highland Way retain their independence regarding food and overnight stops by carrying everything on their backs. Others carry a lighter load but are tied to a strict schedule because they have to book each night's accommodation well in advance.

I did it differently. I used a car to carry the things I needed and to provide me with a bed for the night.

I broke the journey up into daily walks of about 12 to 16 miles i.e. into sections of 5 to 8 miles in length. Returning each day to the car, I then motored to the point where I had turned back that day and made this the starting point for the next day's walk.

Having to drive from one point to another provided an added bonus. It meant that I travelled through parts of the countryside I would not otherwise have seen. As these car journeys were made either early in the morning or late in the evening, there were no traffic problems.

In addition, when I reached the end of the path, I could truly say that I had walked it in both directions – something the average walker has not done.

I think this is the best way to walk any of the long-distance paths. I hope the photographs and comments will encourage you to do the same.

ALL LOADED UP AND READY TO GO!

The West Highland Way, Scotland's first long-distance path, starts in the centre of Milngavie – about 10 kms. north -west of the centre of Scotland's larges city – Glasgow.
Finding this unlikely starting point is probably the most difficult bit of navigation to be encountered on the whole 95 miles from here to Fort William.

- and this is the actual point of departure. It is to be found in the top left hand corner of the Douglas street shopping centre (seen in the previous photograph.)

The path descends to the riverside and follows Allander Water for about a mile then leaves civilisation behind and climbs steeply to go through the lovely Mugdock Wood. The picture shows the profusion of bluebells - which turned out to be such a feature of the walk during the southern half.

Over the crest of the ridge at Carbeth, the path goes northwards to pass the Craigallian Loch on its way to Drymen.
Constantly in view on this stretch are the impressive heights of the Campsie Fells – in particular the enormous bulk of Dumgoyne seen here in the background (and in the reflection in the lake).

After coming down from the high ground around Carbeth, the route to Drymen is through uninteresting lowland farming countryside.
It follows the old track of the Blane Valley railway line to Gartree – easy walking but very dull except for the eastern skyline.

Thankfully, Dumgoyne is always in view and the occasional glance in its direction does much to relieve the monotony of this walk through the area known as Strath Blane.
You may be interested in the fact that three famous men hailed from Strath Blane – Lord Tedder, Marshall of the Royal Air Force during World War 2, John Napier, the inventor of logarithms and George Buchanan, a Reformation scholar.

Gartress – officially a ‘douce hamlet’, but, in reality just a little terrace of houses – no two of which are the same!
The bridge carries the West Highland Way over the River Endrick. Stark and unattractive, it replaces the original 1715 structure. In season, it is an admirable platform from which to view leaping salmon.

This is the centre of the small but very popular town of Drymen. The path does not officially enter the village but the chance of sampling the wares of the many hotels should not be missed. I had dinner at two of them – the Crachan (1714) (the red building on the right) and the Winnock (the white building on the left).

You leave Drymen by walking along the A811 and following it eastwards for about half a mile before turning northwards to enter the Garadhban Forest. This is the view of Drymen before leaving the open countryside for the 3-mile trek through the Garadhban.
Forest roads are easy to walk and, when the path is signposted, easy to navigate. Garadhban Forest is no different from the hundreds of others on long-distance paths.

There's not much to say about the Garadhban Forest except that it's about 500 feet above sea-level and covers some 1300 acres of ground and dates back to 1931.
The rough track you have to walk along to get from one end to the other is very well represented here.

I found that the most remarkable thing about the Garadhban Forest was the presence of this huge stile at the point where the path leaves it.
Nearly 15 feet high and massively built, it is the highest stile I've ever climbed over.

Out into the open ground once more, the path heads downhill into the valley.
Ahead there is the inviting prospect of the first real climb of the trip – an exhilarating walk up the 700 feet high Conic Hill.

Before starting the climb up Conic Hill you have to go down into the valley and cross two bridges – the first over the Kilandan Blandan Burn and the other is this beautiful little bridge over the Burn of Mar. If you're lucky (and I wasn't!) you will see and hear warblers and dippers as you rest your weary limbs in this delightful spot.

There was a thick mist the day I walked up Conic Hill as this picture clearly shows.
It is a view about half way up the hill and looks back towards the Garadhban Forest – the exit point of which is the extreme tip of that spur of dark woodland jutting out to the left of the picture.

This is the view from the top of Conic Hill. The mist spoilt it for me but it is easy to visualise the lovely views you'd get on a nice day looking northwards towards Loch Lomond.
This picture shows the small harbour of Balmaha and some of the islands.

Although the visibility wasn't conducive to long-distance views, looking at such magnificent scenery even through the mist makes you want to take photographs.
This is another view from the top of Conic Hill looking towards a very dim and misty Ben Lomond in the background.

The path does not actually go over the summit of Conic Hill – which is very steep and rocky. I couldn't resist the challenge and over I went. This was the view coming down the path I took over the top on the way to Balmaha. The official path can be seen wending its winding way down on the left.

Coming back on to the official path, I followed it down through the small forest where the Way was profusely lined with beautiful gorse bushes in full and glorious bloom in the month of May.
Quite understandably, this is a very popular forest walk for the many summer visitors to the little lakeside resort of Balmaha. I say 'summer visitors' because there aren't many in the winter!

From Ballmaha the path goes northwards and follows the eastern bank of Loch Lomond for the next 18 miles or so. In theory, this should represent one of the finest walks in the country. In reality, I found that sections of it – particularly the 6 miles between Inversnaid and Inverarnan – to be the most difficult walking I have ever undertaken. However there are some splendid views.

Before I wrenched myself away from Balmaha, I took this shot of the harbour.
Apart from the harbour, Balmaha consists only of a very large car-park, a pub, a café and a garage and views like this one and the previous picture.

On the road from Balmaha to Rowandennan you walk through this beautiful bluebell wood.
It's right on the side of the main road between the two villages and so the going is fairly easy.

There are picturesque views and more picturesque views from the Loch side for the next few miles. These are the bonny, bonny banks of Loch Lomond from a spot where the path leaves the woods and goes right down to the water's edge – something it doesn't do very often.

But here's another one looking back down the Loch to where we've come from.
It was a resting place for lunch near Rowandennan.

This is a view of Rowandennan Lodge from a large rock a little further on.
The Way follows the forest road past the lodge to Ptarmigan Point where there is normally a choice of a low level walk alongside the water's edge or a high level walk through the forest.
Due to a recent prolonged bout of bad weather the lower path had been damaged and was impassable the day I was there - so it was Hobson' Choice.

This shows the northern part of the Loch. It differs greatly from the southern half. It is narrower and much deeper.
This is a view from near Ptarmigan Point looking north and shows the high ground on each side closer together than they are further south.

The path wends its way through the woods and along the shore line to reach the elegant hotel at Inversnaid. It is right on the lake side and there are extensive views over the water. There is also this waterfall at the side of the hotel – formed by the last tumble of the stream on its short but steep journey down from Loch Arklet. The path reaches the hotel by way of the wooden bridge at the top of the falls.

This is the view from Inversnaid Hotel looking across the loch towards Inveruglas on the western bank.

Here is another glimpse of the loch looking northwards - you can't help taking pictures when walking in this area!
The little island in the picture is the quaintly called 'Island I vow' – which, predictably, is a hopeless corruption of its original Gaelic name.

Although it follows the water's edge closely, views of the Loch are only possible from intermittent clearings in the forest on the way.
One such view is this one looking north.
It was taken from some high ground near Rob Roy's cave.

I didn't see any signs of Rob Roy but I did come across these fairly rare mountain goats in the vicinity of Rob Roy's Cave.
I suppose it wouldn't be stretching the imagination too far to visualise Rob Roy making a meal of one of their ancestors!

When the path finally emerges from its tree-rooted course through the woods, it crosses some sandy soil at the water's edge which was a great relief. The previous two miles or so had been the most difficult stretch of walking I'd ever done. Every step had to be carefully placed in an endless succession of thick protruding tree roots.

This is Doune Farm on the last leg of the journey from Inversnaid to Inverarnan. The walking around this area is comfortable – over open ground and offering good views of the Loch.
This looks across the water to Ardlui.

One last look back southwards along the length of Loch Lomond from the high ground over Dubh Lochan.
The little island is I Vow from its northern side.

The main feeder into Loch Lomond at its northern end is the River Falloch.
At this point in the walk it is advisable that you leave the Way, cross the bridge to the western side and make your way to the A82 and the village of Inverarnan where excellent meals can be had.

Coming back to the eastern side of the River Falloch, the Way continues up alongside the river through Glen Falloch.
This picture shows the river tumbling over its craggy bed just below the Falloch Falls.

The waterfall in Glen Falloch.

After about 3 miles the path goes down from the higher ground at Derrydaroch and crosses the river. It then climbs up the western side to cross the main railway line – 'not cross over' but 'cross under' – by means of a very low narrow tunnel. The picture shows some fellow walkers with very large packs on their back having some difficulty in getting through. Yet another good reason for 'doing it my way'.

From here you climb up the steep bank onto the A82 and there is this view of the main railway line running north to south. After crossing this very busy road, the path climbs up to join the old military road which was part of the network of roads built through the Highlands in response to the Jacobite Risings in 1715. This section was built in 1753 by soldiers of the Royal Welch Fusiliers.

Following the military road, the path comes to the heights overlooking Crianlarich. Crianlarich is important as a junction for both road and railway communications and at one time boasted two railway stations. It is regarded as the half-way point of the West Highland Way and is popular with summer tourists - being well equipped with shops, tearooms and accommodation facilities.

This is me (at 69 years of age) on the second leg of the walk between Crianlarich and Tyndrum with the impressive Bein Dorain in the background.

Well, that's the end of the first leg. Good luck with your walkng – whichever way you do it!