

GREAT  
HIGHLAND  
WALKS  
CAPE WRATH  
TRAIL,  
SCOTLAND

# BOTHIES, BOULDERS AND BOGS

*Great Walks* experiences it all in the Scottish Highlands on the challenging Cape Wrath Trail.

WORDS AND PHOTOS [ANDY WASLEY](#)



Andy hiking along the Cape Wrath Trail in Torridon.





**Left:** Hiking towards Ben More Assynt along the river Oykel.

**Below:** Walking north through Assynt.



**I STOOD** by Kearvaig, a white-painted house framed by a turbulent seascape: foam-capped waves pounding black cliffs with seething fury. Exhausted, I dropped my backpack and pulled off my boots. Wet socks, sore feet – and no surprise – over three weeks, I had hiked 450km across rivers, bogs and mountains, ascending more than the height of Everest and K2 combined. A light shower of rain cast a rainbow over the bay. This, then, marked the end of the Cape Wrath Trail – the best and toughest hike of my life.

The Cape Wrath Trail is widely seen as the pinnacle of long-distance hiking in the UK, marrying the intensity of a tough multi-day hike to the rugged beauty of Scotland’s Northwest Highlands. The unmarked route runs for around 450km from Fort William, Scotland’s ‘outdoors capital’, to Cape Wrath – a storm-lashed headland at Britain’s north-westernmost tip. There is no ‘official’ route, although hikers tend to follow a few popular variants. I hiked the

trail in September 2022, towards the end of the hiking season. Walking along through Scotland’s spectacular landscapes, I found a challenge that is increasingly attracting an international audience.

### Sourlies and Special Forces

The Cape Wrath Trail opens in spectacular fashion, with a ferry crossing from Fort William across Loch Linnhe – overlooked by the UK’s highest peak, Ben Nevis – to the trailhead at Camusnagaul. Within a day, memories of the town’s cafes and outdoor shops fade, as mountains gang up on the horizon – towering lumps of rock and peat, patrolled by golden eagles and red deer.

The opening stage of the trail runs through Glenfinnan – made famous by its curving railway viaduct, which featured in the Harry Potter films – before reaching some of Scotland’s most challenging terrain: the Rough Bounds of Knoydart.

Knoydart, often described as the ‘remotest’ part of mainland Britain, is a demanding stretch of bogs, crags and rivers, so unforgiving that it was used to train Special Forces during the Second World War. So, I should not have been surprised that while I was hiking there I met an 80-year-old SAS veteran from Adelaide, trekking across the Rough Bounds with his brother and their two sons.

Ex-Digger Brian Smith was the oldest hiker I met on the trail – a “pretty hardy bloke”, said his son Sean, 38. Hardiness is an essential quality in Knoydart, an area that is so physically exhausting it marks an early end to the Cape Wrath Trail for many hikers. Sean, however, was grateful for the challenge.

“It attracts me that the walk requires navigation,” he said. “To me, it’s the challenge partly; then obviously the beauty of the Scottish Highlands, and the nature of the walk being a kind of choose-your-own-adventure – you can choose a different variant if you’re interested. I like the freedom of it.”

We met outside Sourlies, one of the many bothies (mountain shelters) that offer hikers free access to hard-to-reach parts of the Highlands. These simple buildings, often former farmsteads or shepherds’ huts, afford a break from the trail, and a chance to make new friends.

Sourlies, a tiny structure decorated with a ram’s skull and whisky bottles – empty, alas – housed ten of us on a night when strong winds tore up Loch Nevis, making a booming echo chamber of the mountains. This kind of shared experience outlives the exhaustion that Knoydart inflicts on those who dare to cross it.

### Across the bogs

Knoydart’s savage beauty is more than matched by the mountain scenery that adorns the Cape Wrath Trail’s more northerly reaches. Regions like Torridon – the next stage in the hike – offer a breathtaking glimpse at deep time: layers of ancient rock tearing up into turbulent

skies and descending into wide boggy valleys sculpted by long-vanished glaciers.

Those bogs present hikers with some of the trail’s toughest challenges. Fellow hiker Matthew Bradish, 31, from Manchester, told me he saw them as “a test against yourself.”

“I’d say it’s the toughest ground I’ve ever walked,” he added. “Even on the defined paths, it’s tough – the sheer drops, rocky terrain, wet bogs. It’s mainly bog-trotting, I’d say, for mile upon mile.”

“You get frustrated with yourself, but you’ve just got to take a minute and just know that you will make camp, and everything will be right in the morning.”

I felt this toughness most keenly in the bouldered landscape around Beinn Eithe, an enormous bare massif that had to be crossed about midway through my hike. Scotland’s weather had reverted to heavy rain and high winds as I picked my way around the impassive north face of Sàil Mhòr. Ankle-grabbing heather gave way to boot-sucking bogs. A herd

of red deer watched me, warily, as I navigated from point to point.

Boots soaked through by bog-water, I slipped over long-dead trees buried deep in the peat, clambered over rugged boulders and crossed knee-deep rivers. Despite the exhaustion, I took time to look out across the massif’s colossal central valley and, for a moment, tried to imagine the giant ice cap that had given this place its shape, tens of thousands of years ago.

Later in the second stage I stopped in at another bothy: Shenavall, perhaps the highlight of my hike. In the bothy’s smoky gloom, six of us crowded around a crackling fireplace, our wet boots and socks steaming by the hearth. Outside, the Milky Way arced high above An Teallach – another mountain giant.

It happened to be my 40th birthday. One of my bothy buddies, Andrew, was a whisky salesman – handy. In contemplative mood, sipping single malt from a hip flask, we passed the evening talking about mountain days and bothy nights, and the relentless beauty of the trail.





Above: River crossing in Knoydart.

Below: uardalan bothy.



### Perilous journey

The final stage of the Cape Wrath Trail runs through Assynt, a mountain region dominated by fin-like blades of rock rising from valleys dotted with flat, steely lakes. As I crossed Ben More Assynt, I felt stunned by the scale and brutal magnificence of the landscape ahead of me.

The Cape Wrath Trail is full of these moments of grandeur. But the ruggedness of the landscape and its distance from roads and settlements place significant demands on even the most experienced hikers: from start to finish, map-and-compass skills are essential – particularly in the many areas where paths give way to bare stretches of bog, scree or moor.

Rivers present an especially serious challenge, particularly through Torridon and Assynt. After rain, Scotland's rivers can swell startlingly quickly. Many Cape Wrath Trail hikers are caught by surprise by the force and depth of rivers marked on maps as little more than gentle streams.

I find these moments of challenge

restorative. We rarely face peril in our daily lives, but on the trail we have to pit our wits and determination against the combined assault of long distances, difficult terrain and sometimes appalling weather. But only put a foot wrong, and the Cape Wrath Trail can turn into an ordeal.

Another Australian hiker – Ron, a man in his fifties from Newcastle – had warned me early in the hike: “You’re never more than a step away from danger out here.” He had learned this to his cost: in 2021 he attempted to hike the trail in 14 days but suffered an accident on day 13 and had to be rescued by helicopter.

I, too, have a troubled history with the Cape Wrath Trail, having stumbled on a mountain on my way out of Knoydart during a 2019 attempt; my left knee was injured, forcing me off the trail. Ron and I are far from alone in having had to give up, nor in feeling the urge to return. “This walk got into my soul,” Ron said.

By the time I reached the final stages of the hike, my soul was so full of its glories and challenges that I felt almost invincible. Striding across Sandwood Bay, a windblown expanse of sparkling sand pounded by the relentless Atlantic, I caught sight of the Cape Wrath lighthouse for the first time – just a white speck on a distant cliff.

Bold, by now, and experienced in the trail's brutality, I crossed the toughest river on the route to spend a penultimate night in Strathchailleach bothy. Formerly home to a hermit, James “Sandy” MacRory-Smith, the bothy's walls are still adorned with Sandy's mysterious murals. While there, with Belgian hikers Sven Belis, 32, and Lin Decré, 27, feeding still-damp lumps of peat into the fireplace, I struggled to believe the hike was nearly finished – three weeks after setting off from Fort William.



Left: Looking back across Sandwood Bay.

Below: View towards Kinloch Hourn in Knoydart.



“PUT A FOOT WRONG, AND THE CAPE WRATH TRAIL CAN TURN INTO AN ORDEAL”

### WALK NOTES | CAPE WRATH TRAIL, SCOTLAND.

Time: Around three weeks | Distance: 454km | Ascents: 13,970m | Grade: Challenging



The Cape Wrath Trail leads you across most of the northwest coast of Scotland via Morar, Knoydart, Torridon and Assynt, winding through its most beautiful glens and mountains. It's a tough challenging walk that will throw all weather conditions at you. Extensive maps and guidebooks are available.



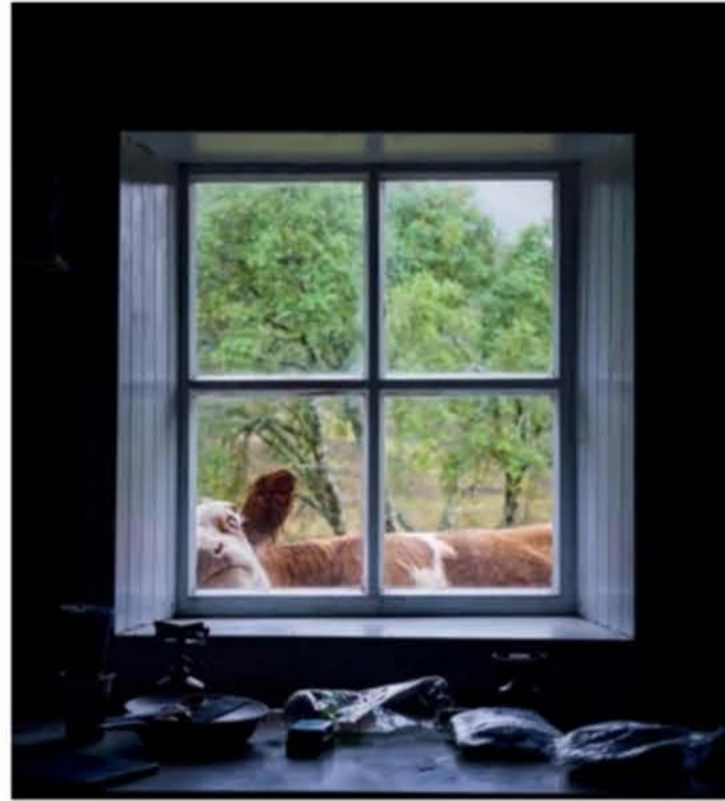
Above: Andy writing up trail notes in Suardalan.



**Clockwise:** The Cape Wrath lighthouse.

Suardalan bothy attracts some unexpected guests.

Corryhully bothy.



### On to the Cape

Sven, Lin and I made the final assault on Cape Wrath together, crossing a rough landscape of by-now familiar bogs, rivers and hills. Rainbows danced out to sea, warning of passing squalls that did nothing to dim our excitement or hold us back, as we crossed the final few metres to Cape Wrath's white lighthouse: journey's end. I rested my head against the whitewashed walls and wept.

From Cape Wrath, we pressed on to Kearvaig, Scotland's northernmost bothy, to enjoy a final night armed with free whisky from Andrew, my Shenavall buddy. Across Kearvaig Bay, the turquoise sea pounded Cape Wrath's dark cliffs. I sat on the beach, watching the waves, reflecting on a journey that had changed everything for me.

There is no hike quite like the Cape Wrath Trail – none that matches Scotland's beauty with a palpable sense of deep time; certainly none that offers dozens of bothy nights and the warm hospitality of strangers by shared firesides. I had set off from Fort William already knowing too well the challenges that lay ahead, but unprepared for the friendships and kindness I would meet on the way.

The wind picked up. Sand whipped into the air and gritted my eyes. A squall danced across the bay, catching the late afternoon sunlight in one final rainbow that moved landwards, towards Kearvaig. Job done. I pulled on my boots, shouldered my rucksack, and made my way home. 🌀

**Need to know:** [capewrathtrailguide.org](http://capewrathtrailguide.org)

### BRITAIN'S RUDEST WALK

There are many reasons to undertake a long distance walk. But with 39-year-old James Forrest living in the British town of Cockermouth, and his brother living in Lickey End, it seemed only right that he should walk from one to the other, adding as many rude names to the route as possible. James undertook 11 marathons in 11 days during his innuendo-fueled hilarious hike, summiting peaks such as Great Cockup, Little Cockup and Andrew's Knob. He also visited woodland labelled Nanny's Breast, a nature reserve called Nob End, and a waterway titled Bottoms Reservoir in his pursuit of pun-filled places.

And he visited crudely named streets in Cumbria, Staffordshire and the West Midlands, such as Bell End, Cocking Yard, Ten Butts Crescent, and Number 2 Passage.

"There was a certain poetry to it, with me living in Cockermouth and my brother moving to near Lickey End – and some silly banter led to a bet that I wouldn't do it," said James.

"I hate losing so I ended up going for it, just to prove my brother wrong. 526km later and I reckon I might just have completed the UK's rudest hike!"

The journey took him from Cumbria in the north-west of England to Worcestershire in the West Midlands and included the likes of Bell End and a sculpture called Gloryhole.

"I was wandering around Bilston trying to find this sculpture," he told the Mirror. "I didn't want to say to someone, 'excuse me, do you know where the Gloryhole is?'"

As well as giving people (and himself) a giggle with the challenge, he also did the walk to raise money for testicular cancer charity Baggy Trousers UK.





# KNOW YOUR PRODUCT

**T** Two writers take on two very different walks, but both carry some of the best gear on the market.

WORDS AND PHOTOS **ANDY WASLEY AND DAVID AULT**

**IF** you're going to take on Scotland's Cape Wrath Trail (pg46) you need hiking gear that won't let you down. Here are some of the items Andy Wasley took on his walk.



### Shelter

Andy carried a Hilleberg Akto one-person tent. Weighing 1.8kg, the Akto is small and light enough to strap to a rucksack, but offers a spacious sleeping space and a porch big enough for stowing a rucksack, boots and wet gear. The tent can be pitched in less than 10 minutes and struck in less than five. Andy used it in high winds and heavy rain and slept soundly every time.

**RRP:** US\$635  
**Website:** hilleberg.com



### Rucksack

A sturdy and comfortable rucksack is a must for the Cape Wrath Trail, where the sheer distance places physical demands on hikers that would be unbearable with a dodgy pack. Osprey's top-of-the-range UNLTD Airscape 68-litre rucksack matches its high price with unrivalled comfort and adaptability. Multiple adjustment points allow hikers to adjust fit, position and configuration with ease, while the generous and flexible main compartment provides ample space for a full trail load.

**RRP:** \$799.95  
**Website:** paddypallin.com.au



### GPS and communications

With mobile phone coverage largely impossible for much of the Cape Wrath Trail, good GPS and satellite communication aids are a great reassurance. Andy took Garmin's Fenix 7X Solar Sapphire watch (with his GPX maps installed before leaving) and the Garmin inReach Mini 2 satellite communicator (additional contract needed). The watch kept him to the trail when the path vanished, while the inReach provided an SOS button that – while not needed – was reassuring on tough days.

**RRP:** Garmin's Fenix 7X – \$1499; Garmin inReach Mini 2 – \$599  
**Website:** garmin.com/en-AU/

### Footwear

While many hikers swear by sturdy mountain boots, trail shoes are an increasingly common sight on the Cape Wrath Trail – offering a decent compromise between the need for comfortable and hardwearing footwear, and shoes that don't hold water after the inevitable soakings in bogs and rivers. Andy wore superb Rocfly G 390 boots from trail shoe specialists inov-8. Graphene foam gives these comfortable boots excellent endurance for the route – and they dry quickly, keeping feet and morale safe.

**Online price:** \$175  
**Website:** inov-8.com



When Andy Wasley decided to take on the Great Wrath Trail he knew he'd need the best hiking gear to do it in.

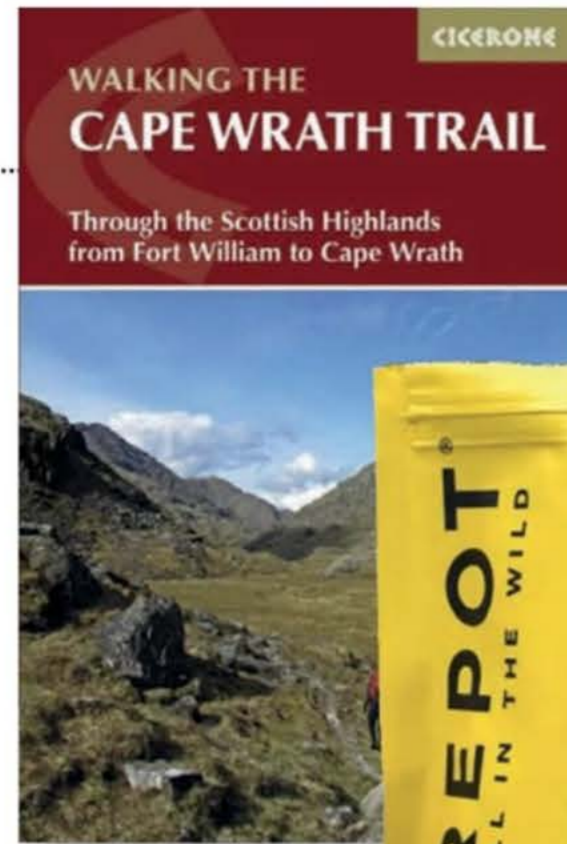


### Maps and guides

Andy took the excellent guidebook *Walking the Cape Wrath Trail*, published by Cicerone. This guidebook describes the trail from south to north in 14 stages, with six alternative itineraries of between two and three weeks. The guidebook includes OS mapping, route profiles and detailed route descriptions and gives you all the information you need about accommodation (including hotels, bothies, B&Bs and bunkhouses), campsites and amenities en-route, to help you plan and prepare for this epic challenge. Andy also carries Harvey Maps' two sheets covering the whole trail. Harvey maps are waterproof and tough and offer a wide view of the landscape at 1:40,000 scale.

**RRP:** Cape Wrath Trail – \$43.99; Maps \$55

**Website:** woodslane.com.au; Harveymaps.co.uk



### Rations

Good food is essential for nutrition and morale on the trail. While it is possible to buy supplies en route, Andy posted ration parcels ahead – relying heavily on vegetarian dehydrated ration packs from Firepot foods. Tasty meals like spicy gumbo, macaroni and greens and veggie chilli kept chilly weather at bay, while packing in an impressive 600 calories per pack.

**Online price:** around \$13.50 per meal

**Website:** firepotfood.com

