



# A TRAIL FOR

The **CAPE WRATH TRAIL** is a challenging, unmarked and magnificently wild long-distance route through Scotland. And walking it could change your life.

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# THE SOUL

“**T**his hike got into my soul.” These words were spoken by a fiftysomething Australian man clad in muddy rain gear, journeying south through Knoydart as I headed north, last September. As we spoke, pulses of rain passed in indistinct waves, stirring the steel-grey surface of Lochan a’ Mhaim. Craggy hills rose about us, bleached green-grey through the fine drizzle – their tops lost in a ragged pall of white cloud.

I had another 230 miles ahead of me: 17 more days of mountains, bogs and river crossings on the Cape Wrath Trail. My second attempt. My first, in 2019, ended with a knee-busting accident, high on a snowy mountain pass below the Forcan Ridge.

Ron – the muddy Australian – was on his second attempt too. Less than a year before we met, he had fallen and injured himself in Knoydart, and been forced to abandon his north-to-south journey a day from the finish line in Fort William. We swapped our luckless stories. “It’s a horrible trail in many ways,” Ron said. “But I’m glad to be back. I can taste the finish in the air. Not far now.” I couldn’t agree that this was a horrible trail. Tough, for sure, and apt to surprise unwary walkers with treacherous terrain and appalling weather. But this hike was in my soul too. And it had been for a long time.

## Deep roots

I had decided to walk the Cape Wrath Trail during another long-distance journey on the Pennine Way, in 2018. I was in the final few months of a long Royal Air Force career that had been unravelling after a terrible falling-out with my boss. Hiking, like the Air Force, had always been a big part of my life. In the Cape Wrath Trail, I saw an epic route that could help me find continuity as everything around me changed.

Maybe this was why my 2019 accident bit so



In Suardalan bothy, near Ratagan.

deeply. My mishap was simple – a stumble on a snowy track on the Bealach Coire na Mhalagain, the final pass as the trail leaves Knoydart. My left leg plunged into a snow-covered void between boulders, wrenching my knee. I fell back and howled with pain and frustration. The injury was painful, but not catastrophic: I was able to stagger down to the Old Military Road into Shiel Bridge, and hitch-hiked to my unexpected final stop in Ratagan. But its impact was huge. Forced from the trail, I felt a deep sense of personal failure, returning home early with a wounded knee and wounded pride. Weak. Defeated.

When I returned to Scotland for a Covid-delayed second attempt, I had spent three years thinking about what had gone wrong, physically and mentally. Renewed confidence, better preparation and a much more positive mindset would, I hoped, see me all the way to Cape Wrath.

## Learning from my mistakes

In 2019 I had been stunned by Knoydart’s ruggedness, mistaking it for hostility. The landscape isn’t hostile, of course: the very suggestion reduces it to a challenge to be

### ACCOMMODATION

It is possible to hike the entire trail without hotels, hostels or B&Bs, but a night under a duvet is good for morale and helps support the local economy. The trail passes many MBA-run bothies, including Kearvaig, Shenavall and Sourlies, as well as private estate bothies like Barisdale and Corryhully. Scotland’s Outdoor Access Code gives you the right to wild camp along most of the route, but take time to read up on your rights and responsibilities – and leave no trace.



Sourlies bothy, on the shore of Loch Nevis.

Looking back towards Ben More Assynt.



conquered. Knoydart is a home to people and wildlife, and deserves more respect than I had allowed it as I stomped through en route to my accident. This time, I had planned a slower route: three weeks instead of two, allowing me shorter days and more nights in bothies and hostels to rest up. I found myself smiling, almost every step, as the reduced pace allowed me more time to enjoy Scotland's raw beauty.

Bothies formed a key part of my route plan,

and I enjoyed an opportunity to stop in at Sourlies, a tiny bothy by Loch Nevis. The hut was full of fellow hikers – more Australians, one of them 80 years old (“a pretty hardy bloke,” his son told me), and two German Scout masters cooking a delicious-smelling stew in the gloom. My 3-week journey also allowed me time to visit Inverie, a tiny village often mislabelled simply (and dismissively) as ‘remote’. Inverie is a bright and confident community with a palpable sense of neighbourliness and pride. I enjoyed my night in the Old Forge, the village’s community-owned pub, and looked out for minke whales in the bay.

Better kit choices surely helped me too. For years, walkers have debated the merits of different types of boot for the trail. In 2019 I wore full-grain leather boots and found the ground too hard-going and boggy. My feet were never dry, and were quickly pounded to exhaustion. This time I took to the trail in

## KIT LIST

- Hilleberg** Akto tent
- inov-8** Roclite G 390 boots
- Icebreaker** merino wool base layer
- Berghaus** Ridgemaster Gore-Tex jacket
- Helly Hansen** Verglas 700 down jacket
- Osprey** UNLTD AirScape 68 rucksack
- Garmin** inReach Mini 2 satellite communicator
- Fenix 7X** Sapphire Solar smart watch
- Harvey** Cape Wrath Trail maps
- Chocolate, trail mix, **Firepot** meal pouches



A rainbow frames Beinn Eighe and Liathach.



“GREAT HERDS OF RED DEER GAZING AT ME AS I HOPPED BETWEEN BOULDERS; AND GOLDEN EAGLES, SOARING HIGH BY SILENT CLIFFS BELOW LIATHACH”



Strathchailleach bothy.



Striding uphill in Assynt.



inov-8's excellent Roclite G 390 boots. Though not waterproof, they dried quickly after every soaking by rain, bog or river, and their exceptional comfort and support sped me through Knoydart. As I passed the scene of my 2019 accident, I wondered if even reaching Cape Wrath could compare to this feeling of vindication. Old ghosts had been exorcised.

### Torridon

North of Knoydart, the Cape Wrath Trail leads on through Torridon and Fisherfield, immense regions of torrential rivers, trackless bogs and towering mountains patrolled by birds of prey. It would be glib to describe any part of Scotland as purely 'wild'. These are peopled landscapes, shaped by human cultivation, the Clearances and modern recreation and conservation. But in Torridon I felt closer to natural and geological history than anywhere I have visited.

Twice, during the second week, I could walk a full 36 hours without seeing another soul. Loneliness has been a challenge my whole life. As a child, I suffered from mental and emotional abuse from my mother, and isolation has often been profoundly troubling for me in adult life. But as I made my way north through the immense cleft between Beinn Eighe and Liathach – utterly, palpably alone – I felt an unfamiliar sensation: peace with my own company.

I had taken the precaution of carrying a satellite communicator, Garmin's brilliant little inReach Mini 2. This lent me the confidence that goes with carrying an SOS button, and would keep me in contact with friends and family when I felt in need of support. But with my new-found self-reliance, I found myself growing less dependent on contact with home. Still, Beinn Eighe was tough: the hardest single day's walking I can remember. Ankle-twisting heather and treacherous river crossings left me feeling exhausted, while the unsullied, pathless landscape demanded almost constant attention to my map and compass. My mood was boosted by glimpses at wildlife: hundreds of frogs in greens, golds and blacks; great herds of red deer gazing at me as I hopped between boulders; and golden eagles, soaring high by silent cliffs below Liathach.

### HAZARDS

The Cape Wrath Trail is a serious undertaking with several notable hazards:

#### RIVER CROSSINGS

The BMC and Mountaineering Scotland websites offer advice on river crossings. Never attempt to cross rivers in spate, and be prepared to turn back, divert or wait for surges to subside.

#### BIOHAZARDS

Midges and deer keds (flies) can be a distracting nuisance, so take a good repellent and check the midge forecast. Mountaineering Scotland says most water sources above human settlements in mountainous areas are safe to drink from, but rodents can spread serious illnesses in woodland and close to settlement – if in doubt, boil or filter your water. Ticks are growing more common in Scotland, and can transmit Lyme disease. Read up on the symptoms before you travel, and take practical precautions against ticks, like wearing long trousers and gaiters.

#### REMOTENESS

Many parts of the Cape Wrath Trail are a considerable distance from roads or settlements. Follow standard advice for travelling in remote places: carry a whistle, tell someone where you expect to be, and carry a satellite communications device or personal locator beacon.



"I GLIMPSED THE LIGHTHOUSE FROM SANDWOOD BAY, AS A WHITE SPECK ON A DISTANT CLIFF"

Kearvaig bothy looks out over the cliffs at Cape Wrath.

Inset: Andy at the Cape Wrath lighthouse.

I reached Shenavall bothy on my 40th birthday, sharing whisky with new friends at the foot of An Teallach. This had been in my plan for months: what better way to mark a big birthday than a big adventure? Soothed by cheerful conversation and the fireplace's homely glow, I could have stayed in Shenavall for days. But Cape Wrath was calling.

### Assynt

Kit proved helpful once again as I banked a rest day in Ullapool before pushing on north. My rucksack (an Osprey UNLTD AirScape 68) was the most comfy I had ever used, and felt practically weightless by the time I'd eaten a good portion of its contents – veggie rations from Firepot – and posted a few needless spares back home. I left Ullapool feeling light on my feet.

Assynt was no less spectacular than Torridon and Fisherfield, although I found the miles there

harder than anywhere. Low-pressure weather over the Atlantic sent powerful north-westerlies tearing across the Highlands, scouring Assynt's primeval landscape with driving rain, and rebuking my every step with furious gusts. Years before, as childhood traumas drove me into depression and anxiety, I might have struggled to deal with the combined effects of brutal weather and exacting terrain. Giving up had come too easily for me; too often, I found myself regretting adventures I hadn't even started. Now, buoyed by Assynt's otherworldly landscape and two weeks on the trail, I felt unstoppable.

The Cape Wrath Trail saves some of its best sights for the final stretch. Glencoul bothy, secluded by a glittering sea loch; Ben Dreavie's tormented expanse of peat hags and shattered sandstone; and Sandwood Bay, that wild northern shore, battered by Atlantic waves whose foam chases ringed plovers across the rippled sand. No view finer, though, than



Cape Wrath. I glimpsed the lighthouse from Sandwood Bay, as a white speck on a distant cliff. After one more night on the trail proper, feeding peat into a blazing fireplace in Strathchailleach bothy, I sped across the final few miles to the Cape.

What to do then, with the hike of my life behind me? Over three weeks I had learned more about myself than I had in twenty years before. No longer a fearful man regretting a broken childhood and fretting about my self-reliance; no more doubt, no regret for a simple slip on a snowy Knoydart track. I turned 40 in the shadow of An Teallach – and there I came of age too. The Cape Wrath Trail was in my soul. I leant my head against the lighthouse's white-painted wall and wept. **T**



### TACKLING THE TRAIL

**Start:** Fort William

**Finish:** Cape Wrath

**Distance:** 450km / 280 miles

**Ascent:** 13,970m / 45,800ft

Andy followed most of the route set out in the excellent Cicerone guidebook, *Walking The Cape Wrath Trail*, but diverted via Inverie in Knoydart, with rest days at Ratagan and Ullapool, so took 22 days in total. Many hikers aim for about two weeks on the trail, but the rugged terrain can make even moderate distances seem exhausting – take as much time as you can afford to. Cape Wrath is a military firing range and can be closed for training. Check firing times on the MOD's range website (search for 'Cape Wrath firing times').

Taking a moment to admire Sandwood Bay.

