

The Last Great Wilderness

Though part of the Scottish mainland, remote Knoydart is only accessible by ferry or a long walk

by FIONA RUSSELL

DRIVING west of Loch Garry from the A87 towards Kinloch Hourn, in the north-west Scottish Highlands, the sense of remoteness is immediate. The road winds, narrow and seemingly endless, through almost uninhabited countryside.

On the final section of the 35km (22-mile) route, my foot hovers nervously over the brake as I drive down a steep slope, rocky crags on either side, to reach a tiny settlement at the head of Loch Hourn. At Kinloch Hourn the road ends, literally.

From here, you must continue on foot or by boat to access Knoydart, a peninsula celebrated as one of the UK's last great wilderness areas.

My partner Gordon and I plan to walk a rough track to reach Barrisdale Bay, where we will base ourselves for a couple of days of wild camping and mountain hiking.

It is also possible to travel to Knoydart by boat on Loch Hourn to Barrisdale or

from Mallaig to the southern and largest Knoydart settlement of Inverie. Whichever route you choose, you are truly getting away from it all.

The rugged landscape of Knoydart, edged by Loch Hourn to the north and Loch Nevis to the south, is one of the primary attractions, especially for outdoors fans.

The peninsula, a large part of which is managed by the Knoydart Foundation, extends to some 222 square km (55,000 acres) and is home to some of Scotland's

highest mountains, including both Munros and

Corbetts – Scottish mountains of more than 914m (3000ft) and 762m (2500ft) respectively. Gordon and I have set our sights on the three highest peaks, Luinne Bheinn, Meall Buidhe and Ladhar Bheinn.

First, we need to walk almost 11km (seven miles) to Barrisdale carrying heavy packs.

The footpath along the southern edge of Loch Hourn is rockier and more undulating



“High mountains plummeting to the edge of the sea loch”

Left: Loch Hourn and Barrisdale Bay

Summer/Autumn Kit:

- Large rucksack for overnight camping
- Lightweight tent
- Sleeping bag and mat
- Cooking stove, pot & utensils
- Mobile phone & portable charger
- Water bottle
- Food for meals and snacks
- Smaller day pack
- Waterproof clothing
- Walking boots
- Compass & OS Map: Explorer 413 or Landranger 33
- Head torch, hat & gloves
- Midge net & repellent
- Sun lotion



top tip

Merino baselayers are quick drying and get less whiffy so you can wear them for longer!

than I had imagined – and there are several steep climbs away from the shore over rocky outcrops. But the rewards are magnificent vistas of high mountains plummeting into the ragged edge of the sea loch.

As we continue, the late September sun is setting fast, painting warm hues on the calm water.

The second half of the walk stays closer to the shore and is more gently undulating, apart from a final last climb. We pass through woodland of pine and birch, all the time looking keenly ahead for the sandy bay.

It takes more than 2.5 hours to glimpse Barrisdale, with Ladhar Bheinn rising magnificently across the bay. Then, as we turn left on a wider track, another of our Munro targets, Luinne Bheinn, looms ahead.

It is almost dark as we head towards a stone bothy and an area where campers are encouraged to pitch up. By now, the mountains are lumpy silhouettes against the darkening glow of the sky but they still give us reason to chat excitedly about our hopes for this adventure.



Inverie

We have decided to camp, rather than take our chances on space in Barrisdale Bothy, but we can still access its running water and toilet.

Quickly pitching our two-person tent, I'm grateful a light breeze is seeing off the midges, which can be a major pest in the summer. Despite the good weather, there are very few people around, and we enjoy a dram while relishing the tranquility of the location.

We both drift easily to sleep after the hike and wake early to another calm day. We decide to attempt all three Munro summits in one go and after a speedy breakfast, >>>



Fiona on Ladhar Bheinn

top tip

Download a navigation app, such as OS Maps, as an additional aid to a map and compass.



Gordon on Luinne Bheinn

agree to do one more Munro, leaving the last for another trip. We know we want to return to Knoydart again so I suggest that next time we arrive by a different route via Inverie to walk the third Munro – and maybe a few Corbetts, too.

Luinne Bheinn is the closer and smaller of the two we've yet to do so we shoulder our packs and make for it. As we begin the ascent, the views are spectacular again. We can see across to Loch Nevis and the distinctive outlines of the islands of Eigg and Rum.

We also looking longingly towards Meall Buidhe, the third Munro, but with the sun now sinking towards the horizon, the best plan is to head back to our camp.

The bothy is busier this evening and we head inside to say hello. Two men have walked in from Inverie, a couple summited both Luinne Bheinn and Meall Buidhe, while a solo walker had an early start from Barrisdale and also climbed Ladhar Bheinn.

Everyone agrees they have rarely visited such a special location and will definitely be returning. 📍

we head westwards for the tallest Munro, Ladhar Bheinn at 1022m (3356ft). An obvious path crosses a bridge over a river en route to Coire Dhorrcail, a vast corrie.

A narrow stalkers' path zigzags upwards and Gordon and I find ourselves spellbound by the horseshoe of tall craggy cliffs and buttresses above us. The route climbs over the Druim a' Choire Odhair ridge, offering ever more expansive views.

The summit and small cairn on Ladhar Bheinn is easily located and we enjoy an early lunch. We haven't seen a soul since we left the bothy and this solitude amid a wild landscape is exactly what I'd hoped Knoydart would be.

Consulting the map – and then Gordon – I realise we still have a long way to go to reach the next two Munros. Here in Knoydart, everything looks huge and demanding.

It is a long descent, following a south-easterly line above a series of superb corries. We climb up and down via ridges and bealachs aiming for a high pass of Mam Barrisdale, at some 457m (1500ft) above sea level.

By now we are both tiring. We check our watches and realise we've only around four hours until sunset. We

Alternative Routes:

- ▲ Take a ferry or chartered boat from Mallaig to Inverie, the main settlement in Knoydart. There are B&Bs, as well as self-catering and hostel options.
- ▲ Book a private RIB from Arnisdale or Glenelg to Barrisdale.
- ▲ Walk from Glen Dessary to the head of Loch Nevis and then through Mam Meadail.