

The great outdoors

Am blàr a-muigh

Walking and climbing are sports enjoyed by people the length and breadth of the British Isles but where better to enjoy these pursuits than the demanding Highlands of Scotland?

The highest mountain in Britain, Ben Nevis near Fort William, is a magnet for walkers and climbers. Its neighbour, Aonach Mor, has a high quality gondola which takes mountain bikers and visitors up the mountain in summer and skiers and snowboarders to the ski grounds in winter.

The West Highland Way - a 152 km trek from Glasgow - takes in some of the most magnificent scenery in Scotland and finishes in Fort William under the shadow of Ben Nevis. En-route be inspired and touched by the history of Glencoe or daunted by the prospect of The Devil's Staircase.

The Great Glen Way continues the journey from Fort William to Inverness along a way-marked route which traverses the country's greatest geological fault and follows sections of Thomas Telford's historic Caledonian Canal.

Meanwhile, top mountaineers and adventurers confirm the Cairngorms as one of the wildest and most challenging terrains in the world.

Further west, the mountains of Wester Ross meet the Atlantic where exciting challenges lie in wait. More names to play with the imagination include the Five Sisters of Kintail, the Inaccessible Pinnacle (popularly known as the 'In Pinn') or Stac Pollaidh (pronounced Stack Polly). The mighty Cuillins on Skye are also a world mecca for climbers, walkers and mountaineers.



Lochaber - the outdoor capital of the UK

Loch Abar - prìomh bhaile spòrs na rìoghachd

*Highland Spotlight
Sùil air a' Ghàidhealtachd*



Underlining Lochaber's image as the Outdoor Capital of the UK, the area has won its bid to host the 2007 UCI Mountain Bike and Trials World Championships - despite strong competition from Canada and Australia.

So important are these championships, they are second only to the Olympics in the cross country discipline. The Lochaber event, based around Fort William, is in fact the last major of its kind before the Beijing Olympics of 2008.

Over 700 competitors from 45 nations will converge on Fort William in 2007 with around 40,000 spectators grabbing every available vantage point - especially for the downhill event which sees competitors descend 525 vertical metres over a 2.6 kilometre course in just 4 adrenaline fuelled minutes.

The 2007 event is the culmination of years of hard work by many in the Lochaber area. This drive and determination to succeed is typical of what to expect from every corner of the Highlands.

Also in Lochaber and further bolstering the area's outdoor credentials lies The Ice Factor at Kinlochleven. Here, one of the world's largest permanent indoor ice climbing facilities is expected to attract many of the 280,000 mountaineers who visit Lochaber every year.

Based in a renovated carbon storage bunker - a remnant of the area's former aluminium industry - the £2 million Ice Factor is helping breathe new life into an area which for years had suffered unemployment and economic hardship.

This all weather facility employs around 18 staff and houses over 1,000 square metres of indoor rock and ice climbing. A multi-agency approach to funding The Ice Factor was adopted, demonstrating the joined up thinking and co-ordination of public agencies in the Highlands of Scotland.

Based in the heart of some of Scotland's most popular climbing areas, this European Union funded facility is ideally placed to appeal to the mountaineering market.

Winter sports

Spòrs geamhraidh

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The Highland area boasts three high quality snow sports resorts. Whilst they are weather dependent, all cater to both winter and summer visitors.

South of Fort William is Glencoe Mountain Resort which with 200 hectares of skiable terrain offers 20km of pisted runs and a longest run of 1.6km. In summer, visitors are uplifted to some of the most spectacular scenery where they can enjoy the nationally important geology of the area.

CairnGorm Mountain Ltd has undergone a multi-million pound transformation in recent years. A new mountain railway can operate at high wind speeds and a mountain exhibition tells the story of how the mountains have evolved, and how wildlife has adapted to survive in such extreme conditions. Nearby, Aviemore - a name synonymous with outdoor recreation and winter sports - is undergoing a major investment programme led by private developers. This includes improved accommodation, housing and recreational attractions, a new conference centre, a hospitality skills academy and a championship golf course.

Finally, Nevis Range near Fort William has a gondola system that whisks skiers and snowboarders up Aonach Mor in the winter months and serves for downhill mountain bikers and sightseers in the summer. The area around the base station has a labyrinth of mountain bike and walking trails.





The natural environment

An àrainn nàdarra

Arguably the area's most valuable and famous asset, the region's outstanding environment is recognised by no fewer than 16 designated National Scenic Areas (NSAs) as well as a main feature of the Cairngorms National Park.

From native Caledonian pinewood forests to sea cliffs, tidal mudflats, sandbanks and reefs, the habitats of the Highlands support a diverse range of special species of plants, birds and mammals. These include the white tailed sea eagle which can be found on Rum, Skye and the West Highlands and the world's second largest colony of Manx shearwaters which nest on the Island of Rum.

As an example of how unique and special a place the Highlands is in the natural world, 98 per cent of the British population of the rare plant, the one-flowered wintergreen occurs in Balblair Wood near Golspie in Sutherland.

Bottlenose dolphins, common and grey seals, otters and freshwater pearl mussel all thrive in and around the waters of the region. The sea cliffs of Caithness are home to the often spectacular fish-eating gulliemots, kittiwakes, razorbills, puffins and shags.

For those fortunate enough to live in the Highlands,

the natural environment is part of life. It is an asset that is recognised, enjoyed and managed positively for future generations, and directly supports the lucrative tourism and outdoor recreation sectors. Over 20 National Nature Reserves around the Highlands are managed and promoted for the conservation of scenery, habitat and wildlife. Public access and enjoyment is a key aim of the management of all these reserves.

Outstanding geology and landscape, existing interpretation facilities and a partnership approach to sustainable economic development have resulted in the North West Highlands becoming the first area in Scotland to be awarded European Geopark status.

Outside the designated reserves, opportunities abound for locals and visitors to enjoy the great outdoors. Take the Moray Firth bottlenose dolphins for example. Cruise boats take thousands of people to see these mammals. Land-based vantage points, like Chanonry Point at Fortrose or Nigg in Easter Ross can sometimes get you just as close to these amazing creatures.

Many purpose built mountain paths blend into the landscape providing access to experience the wonderful scenery and geology of the area.





This is the work of Rachel Higgins, created when she was artist-in-residence in Mallaig and the Small Isles. Rachel works in metal and creates automata and metal sculptures of animals and birds; using found objects, metal filters and screens. She assembles her pieces using a variety of techniques similar to repairs and constructions carried out on her family farm. She has exhibited widely and has many pieces in public and private collections.