

## TRAVEL

# BARGING THROUGH THE CALEDONIAN CANAL



**WALK TALL:** Forest track on the hillside above Loch Lochy

## Alan Hart enjoys the magnificent scenery of the Highlands on a mixed walking and barge holiday

IT'S not just hungry hikers who drop in for a quick snack at the Abriachan Eco-Campsite and Cafe overlooking the shores of Loch Ness.

Last summer a golden eagle swooped down as it crossed The Great Glen and took off with one of their free-range chickens.

Ecology enthusiasts Howie White and Sandra Dee were philosophical about Mother Nature's violent streak and the loss of their Light Sussex hen.

"The eagle was just doing what comes naturally," said Howie, who is also a captain with the Loch Ness Lifeboat

crew. "I'm just sorry I didn't have a camera handy to capture the dramatic moment, which happened a few feet from where I was standing."

Tales of the unexpected can be par for the course if you're crossing from coast to coast along The Great Glen which links Inverness and The North Sea on the east with Fort William and the Atlantic Ocean to the west.

Some hardy folk prefer to camp in the fields along the 60-mile route of The Caledonian Canal, which was started by celebrated engineer Thomas Telford in 1802 and took 20 years to complete.

I chose a more decadent way of seeing the spectacular scenery by using a luxury barge which has been converted to create en-suite cabins accommodating 12 passengers and five crew.

The Ros Crana started life as a dry cargo vessel in Belgium in 1962 and was transporting cement along the rivers and canals of Holland until it was bought by holiday pioneer Martin Balcombe.

After a complete make-over, in 2012 it joined its sister ship, Fingal of Caledonia, criss-crossing the canal and giving nature-lovers a chance to choose their activities as they spend a week enjoying Highland hospitality.

'Walk The Great Glen' is one of those options, along with cycling, canoeing and sailing-themed weeks.

After meeting the crew and fellow passengers on board Ros Crana at Muirtown Locks, Inverness, we began our walk by heading a mile east to our starting point at the Moray Firth.

Then, after symbolically dipping our boots in the water which merges with the North Sea, we turned round and walked back along the towpath to board our boat which had meantime headed west to the banks of Loch Ness. It was time for dinner and an introductory chat with Martin, the owner and skipper, around the communal dining table.

Each morning, after a hearty breakfast, we left the barge with packed lunches in our rucksacks for the remain-



ing six daily stages of our westward journey to the Atlantic Ocean.

We were led by outdoor activity expert Chris Absolom, who has an encyclopaedic knowledge of Scottish history and folklore. Chris was also able to identify and point out the local flora and fauna.

In the air you can spot buzzards, red kites, ospreys, grouse, pheasants, black

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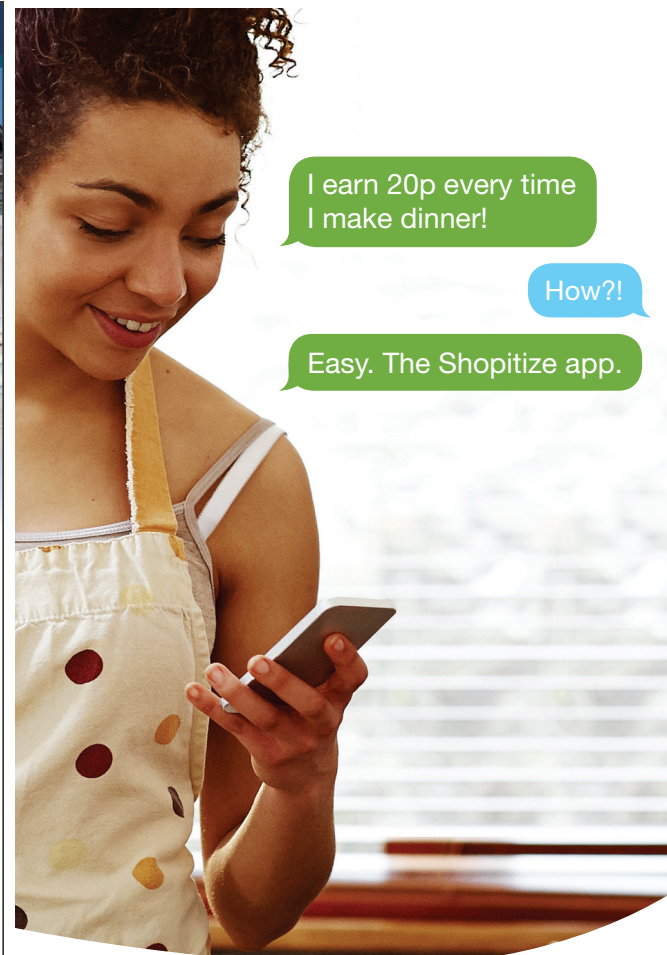
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**HIGHLAND BEAUTY:**  
A couple walk by  
the locks of the  
Caledonian Canal at  
Fort Augustus

and red-throated divers, dippers, herons, yellowhammers, meadow pipits, crested tits, skylarks, woodpeckers, willow warblers, stonechats, wheatears and if you're lucky, the lord of the skies, a golden eagle.

On land there are deer, red squirrels, pine martens and otters.

The length of our walks varied from six miles on the first afternoon to 15 miles on the second day.

Although Ros Crana took the direct 60-mile route, we covered a total of 80 miles as Chris led us on diversions to points of interest.

These included the eco-campsite at Abriachan (where the chicken came second); the Loch Ness Monster Centre at Drumnadrochit; the ruins of Urquhart Castle, the former home of Clan Grant which featured in the movie *The Private Life of Sherlock Holmes*; the former garrison town of Fort Augustus; and the home of the Cameron Clan chieftain at Achnacarry Castle, where more than 25,000 Commandos trained during World War 2.

We also called at The Eagle Barge Inn, South Laggan, a floating pub between Loch Oich and Loch Lochy, crammed with random memorabilia.

Among the fascinating features were swords used in movie classics such as *Braveheart*, *Lord of the Rings*, *Robin Hood: Prince of Thieves*, and *The Last Samurai*. It even had a pair of light sabres from *Star Wars*.

Our marathon hike ended in dramatic fashion as we passed a few miles north of Britain's highest mountain, the towering Ben Nevis, before dropping down the locks known as Neptune's Staircase leading to Loch Linnhe. Here we dipped our boots in the sea loch leading to the Atlantic to complete our mission and earn commemorative certificates.

En route we had enjoyed a stunning succession of views as we walked through woodland paths and ancient drovers' trails guarded by columns of conifers. There were waterfalls and babbling burns as we trekked past snow-capped mountains and Britain's deepest

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## TRAVEL FACTS

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**WALK FANS:** Dougie Grimston and mum Sheila from Edinburgh

lakes. On the final night our kilted captain Martin, from Somerset, gave a spirited rendition of *Ode to A Haggis*, which would have made Robbie Burns proud. The former drama graduate, who now lives in Gairloch, had revealed his inner thespian.

Then we enjoyed the chicken stuffed with haggis provided by resident chef Simon Wilkinson, whose wholesome meals and home-baked bread and cakes ensured there was no weight loss despite our daily exercise.

The passengers with whom I'd shared the experience were a cheerful mixed bunch which included a nurse, a teacher and a retired bank manager.

Among them were Sheila Grimston, a risk manager, and her son Dougie, 24, a gardener and greenkeeper, from Comiston, Edinburgh.

Sheila said: "This is the longest I've walked since I was 15 and the first time Dougie and I have hiked together since he was a little boy. We wanted a challenge but we also wanted security and it was marvellous not to worry about the food or the luggage."

"The scenery has been fantastic and despite the mixed weather we've enjoyed every minute."

## LATE DEALS

**MALLORCA:** Jet2 Holidays has a three night B&B break in Palma, staying at the 3 star Hotel Araxa, departing from Edinburgh on May 9 for £259 per person based on 2 sharing.

**IBIZA:** 7 nights self-catering is also available at Playa D'En Bossa in the 3 star-plus Ryans Ibiza Apartments, from Edinburgh on May 19 for £269 per person based on 2 sharing, includes a 22kg baggage allowance and return transfers.

**MALLORCA:** Or try 7 nights self-catering in Alcudia at the 3 star-plus The Olive Beach Alcudia, departing from Edinburgh on May 9 for £289 per person based on 2 sharing, includes a 22kg baggage allowance and return transfers. Visit [www.jet2holidays.com](http://www.jet2holidays.com), or call 0800-408 5594.

**AUTUMN SUN CRUISE:** GoCruise (0131-443 0766) has sale cabins from £949 p/p on a 12-night Fred Olsen cruise from Rosyth on September 30

to Spain, France and Portugal, visiting Lorient, Bilbao, Aviles, El Ferrol, Oporto and Hornfleur. Upgrade to all inclusive drinks for £10 per day.

**CRETE:** Red Sea Holidays is offering 7 nights, all-inclusive at the 4.5\* Annabelle Beach Resort, Hersonissos, from £567pp, departing May 13 from Glasgow to Crete International Airport based on two people sharing including flights, 20kg luggage and resort transfers. Call 0207-332 2655 or visit [www.redseaholidays.co.uk](http://www.redseaholidays.co.uk).



**MAY BREAK:** Turkish Airlines has revealed where Edinburgh's jet-setters are flying to this spring. With two bank holidays to make the most of in May, there

has never been a better time to use some holiday days and seek some sunshine abroad. The top 5 spring city break destinations from Edinburgh are 1 Antalya, Turkey; 2 Muscat, Oman; 3 Athens, Greece; 4 Aqaba, Jordan; 5 Ercan, North Cyprus

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