Exploring the Great Glen

Mark Whitley cruises the Caledonian Canal

For thousands of years the Great Glen, that dramatic geological gash that splits the Highlands in two, has been an important trade and communications route Since the Great Glen already had lochs Ness, Oich and Lochy along its length, and a sea loch at each end, it was ideal for a sea-to-sea canal. So in 1802, that great Scottish-born civil engineer Thomas Telford recommended the construction of the Caledonian Canal, a ship canal linking the North Sea with the Atlantic Oceean. The government agreed to fund the work; it was the first state-funded transport project in the country, and has remained in public ownership ever since.

When the canal opened on 24th October 1822 it was unfinished, and regarded by Telford as a comparative failure — it was only twelve feet deep and so could not accommodate the larger vessels that Telford had hoped for. The project was too important to abandon, however, so in 1844-7 the canal was closed for major improvements costing £228,000, but when it reopened the railways were already well-established for transporting goods.

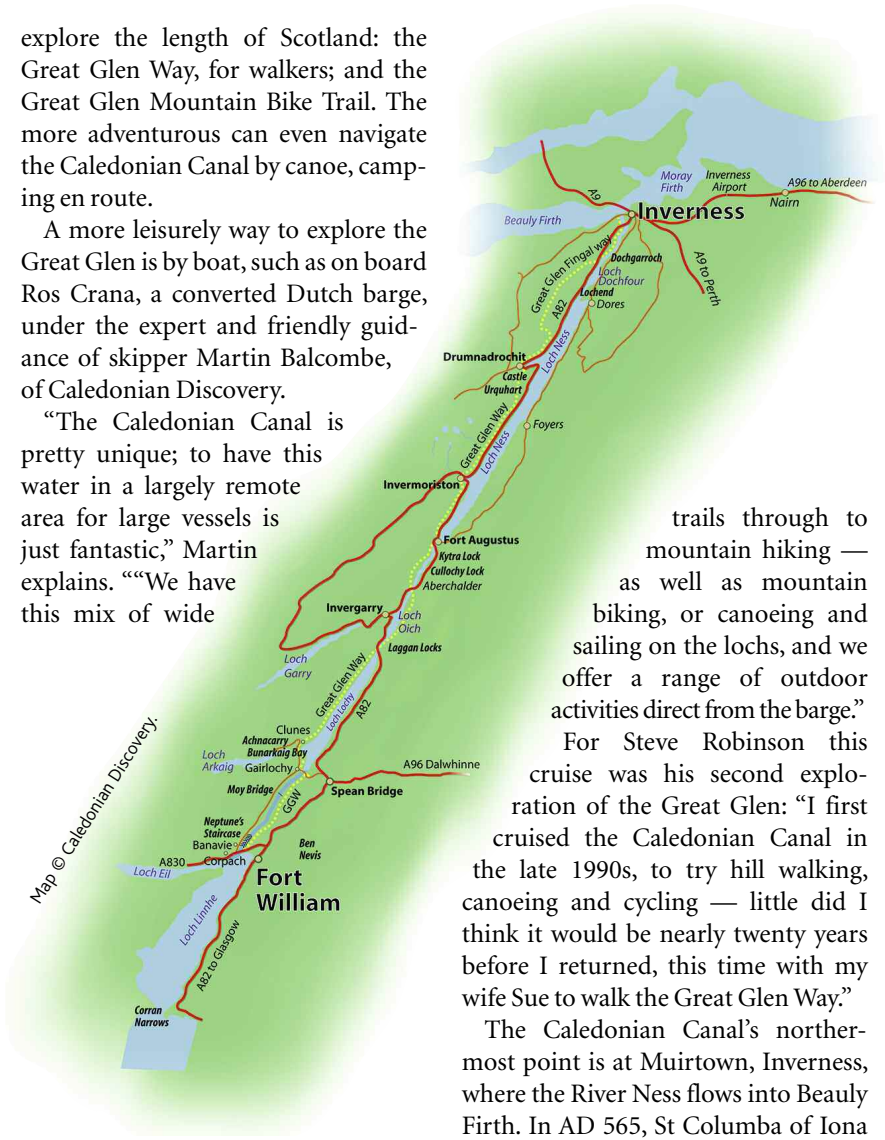
Less than half of the Caledonian Canal's sixty miles are manmade, the remainder being navigable lochs, with twenty-nine locks (staffed by forty full-time and part-time lock keepers) and ten swing bridges along its length. Its towpaths are now part of two long-distance routes for those wanting to

Urquhart Castle, on the banks of Loch Ness. Photo © Picture Finders / travel-pictures.co

explore the length of Scotland: the Great Glen Way, for walkers; and the Great Glen Mountain Bike Trail. The more adventurous can even navigate the Caledonian Canal by canoe, camping en route.

A more leisurely way to explore the Great Glen is by boat, such as on board Ros Crana, a converted Dutch barge, under the expert and friendly guidance of skipper Martin Balcombe, of Caledonian Discovery.

"The Caledonian Canal is pretty unique; to have this water in a largely remote area for large vessels is just fantastic," Martin explains. ""We have this mix of wide open spaces and enclosed protected areas, wonderful mountain scenery and interesting shorelines. You can explore the Great Glen through a variety of walks — towpaths and forest trails through to mountain hiking — as well as mountain biking, or canoeing and sailing on the lochs, and we offer a range of outdoor activities direct from the barge."



The Caledonian Canal's northernmost point is at Muirtown, Inverness, where the River Ness flows into Beauly Firth. In AD 565, St Columba of Iona passed through here on his journey south along the River Ness, where he had an encounter with a "water horse" (in the River Ness rather than the loch of the same name) — the first eyewitness account of what became known as the Loch Ness Monster, that appellation being coined by the *Inverness Courier* in the 1930s.

Loch Ness itself is huge: deeper than the North Sea for most of its length (in places 900 feet deep), twenty-four miles long and with a surface area of thirty-five square miles, the volume of water it contains is more than all of

***Above,* Loch Oich; *below,* cruising on Loch Lochy. "The Caledonian Canal is pretty unique," says Martin Balcombe *(bottom)* of Caledonian Discovery. Photos © Caledonian Discovery.**

A glorious view of Loch Lochy from Creag nan Gobhar. Photo © Caledonian Discovery.

lakes and reservoirs in England and Wales combined.

"Only by travelling down its length at a sedate pace do you properly appreciate the immensity of Loch Ness," explains fellow passenger Ian Greaves. "I was most impressed by the fact that more people have trodden on the Moon than have descended to the icy depths of its bottom — and that the winds can whip up six-foot waves that can crash over the deck of the boat."

Urquhart Castle on its western bank is a major landmark while travelling along Loch Ness, and is particularly impressive when viewed from the water. The castle, which dates mainly from 1691, is on the site of a Dark Age fortress that was reputedly the stronghold of Brude, king of the Picts.

From the eastern shoreline there is a pleasant and easy stroll up through woodland, with opportunities to spot red squirrel and pine marten, to the Falls of Foyers. These dramatic waterfalls, plummeting ninety feet into a rocky amphitheatre, were a favourite of Romantic poets including Wordsworth and Keats, and inspired Robert Burns to pen a verse on the spot during a 1787 visit:

Among the heathy hills and ragged woods
The roaring Fyers pours his mossy floods;
Till full he dashes on the rocky mounds…"

At the southern end of Loch Ness is Fort Augustus, "the most centrical point of the habitable part of the Highlands" according to Edward Burt in 1754. Here the Five Locks raise Caledonian Canal by forty feet. Building these locks was "the most arduous and uncertain work" in the whole of the canal's construction, said Thomas Telford — and in fact one of the locks collapsed in 1837 and all of them had to be rebuilt.

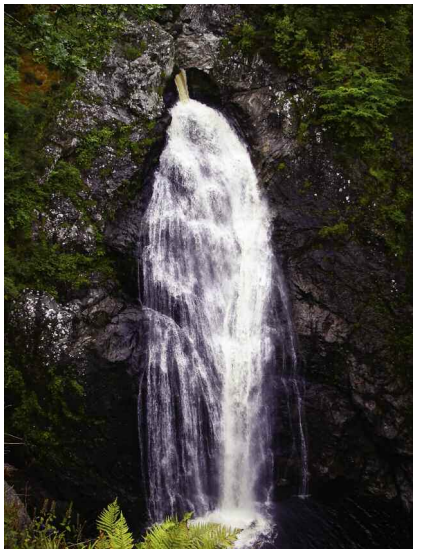
Alongside the lower lock is the Jubilee Fountain, dedicated to Queen Victoria — though she found canal travel tedious during her excursions along the Caledonian Canal in 1847 and 1873, and thought the inhabitants of Fort Augustus "very rude" for staring at her as she ate her lunch on board the royal steamship.

From Fort Augustus our waterborne journey continues south-west along a three-mile stretch of the Caledonian Canal to Loch Oich, the smallest of the three main lochs along the Great Glen, and arguably the most attractive, with its quiet wooded shores and islets. It is also the perfect place to spend the night at anchor, with wonderful opportunities for stargazing.

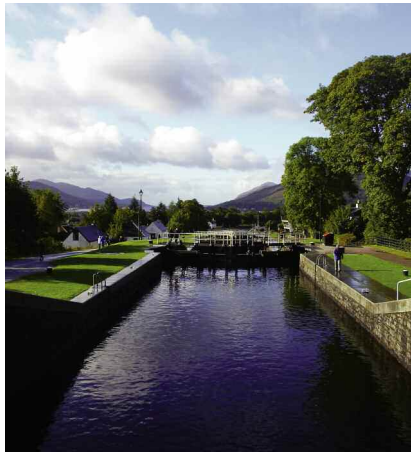
Here, the Bridge of Oich is an elegant double cantilever bridge, built in 1854 by James Dredge, a brewer turned engineer from Bath, after the stone bridge spanning the River Oich had been swept away by floods five years previously.

From Loch Oich the Caledonian Canal continues along the picturesque

***Above*, a glimpse of Loch Ness from its southern end. *Below*, the Falls of Foyers.**



***Above*, the elegant double-cantilever Bridge of Oich. *Below*, journey's end at Neptune's Staircase, Banavie.**



Laggan Avenue to join Lochy Lochy at Laggan Locks. Hereabouts (the exact location is unknown) is the site of the Battle of the Shirts, a clan dispute fought in July 1544 over who would become chieftain of MacDonalds of Clan Ranald; the day of battle was so hot that both sides took off their plaids and fought in their shirts — hence the battle's name.

Loch Lochy (or Loch of the Dark Goddess, in Gaelic) looks natural but in fact the canal engineers raised its level by twelve feet. At its southern end is Gairlochy, where a regulating lock was built to maintain different water levels between loch and canal.

The final stretch of the Caledonian Canal leads to Banavie, and the eight locks of Neptune's Staircase (Robert Southey called these locks "the greatest works of art in Britain") which lower the canal by sixty-two feet in a quarter-mile of continuous masonry and link it to Loch Linnhe and the sea.

Here now is our journey's end, in the shadow of Ben Nevis, as we disembark full of happy memories and planning our next visits to the Great Glen.

"Exploring the whole length of the Caledonian Canal by boat," Martin Balcombe concludes, "is a great way to experience what the Highlands has to offer." ■

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