

Cape Wrath Trail – Practical Notes

Introduction

The purpose of this report is to write some practical tips that may help others who are about to embark on the great adventure that the CWT is. While we really enjoyed the trek and found the beauty and the remoteness of the trek intoxicating, others before me have sufficiently described it, and have a much better way with words. So expect dry facts here – pieces of advice that may help you to tackle the logistics and planning aspects swifter, so that there is more energy to enjoy.

We are 4 Belgian Friends, between 44 and 58, with an average fitness level. We have done multi-week treks before (GR20, Norway, Iceland,...) but CWT was the first time that we planned to hike 20 days with tent and food. It was also the first time we'd hike large sections without waymarks or even trails.

We were very lucky with the weather. In fact, the first week, we found it too hot. The second week, we had quite some rain, but it was never really pouring down. The last week brought us the usual mix of sun and showers. All-in-all, we were very lucky, with a lot of dried up bogs and easy river crossings.

Food & Gear, Ticks

We chose to send ahead 2 supply packages, each with food for 6 days, one to Cluanie Inn (at the sixth day of the hike), and one to Clachan Farm house, near Inverlael (at the 12th day of the hike). Those packages weighted around 18 kg, for 4 people and we sent them via Royal Mail from a UK post office that we passed on our way from Dover to Fort William. We ordered the gas canisters separately online and also sent them to those resupply points, because we didn't think Royal Mail would allow us to ship them.

We bought supplies for the last two days at the London Stores near Kinlochbervie.

We made some investment in light weight gear (e.g. Exped Thunder backpack) and quality tents that would give us some room even in bad weather (Hilleberg Nallo 3GT). The big tents may create a bit more of a challenge when looking for a suitable camping spot, but still, we didn't regret for a moment the choice we made. We could have cosy dinners with 4 in one tent and leave wet gear in the large porch.

We chose a route that would bring us in some of the more remote areas, even it was longer. The fact that we didn't need any of the local stores for resupply made that possible.

We had tea at the Glenfinnan Monument, Coffee and cake in the hotel in Kinlochewe (opens at 12:30), crumpets in Oykel Bridge and coffee at the Old school house. All other places were closed when we passed: Tearoom at Kinloch Hourn, Dundonell, Riconoh Hotel/Pub.

Some of us had a lot of tick bites along the way (easily around 60-70), the worst was definitely the grass field in front of the Corryhully bothy... In the beginning we were a bit freaked out by how many bites we had despite being careful (long trousers, choose stones over grass for sitting,...) , but you have to somehow "get over it". We managed by carefully checking (also on each other's skin) and removing ticks on a daily basis. Just to be sure, we also tested our blood for Lyme disease about a month after our return, and we all tested negative.

Route

For the details of our itinerary, see file "CWT Trip Notes English.pdf"

The route we chose, which steers clear of civilization as much as possible, and avoids taking a taxi to Ullapool, was only possible because of our stay in Clachan Farm House in Inverlael. (At least if you've put the extra constraint that you don't want to carry more than 6 days of supplies). Clachan Farm House is a very friendly B&B, great food & bed, friendly host, you can even do laundry! Only drawback: they only have 2 rooms, and can be booked up rather quickly. So if you have some flexibility, and want a remote route, I would start by looking for a night that the Clachan Farmhouse B&B can be booked, then count backwards from there for your start date. The other accommodation you'll have to book (Cluanie Inn, Kinlochbervie) have more options, and should be less of a bottleneck.

We intensively used Iain Harper's description, and the 2 Harvey Maps. There was just one section on day 5 that was not covered by it, and I took a photocopy of a OS map for that part.

Nicola and David (N&D), whom we met on the trail told us about the cheapest option to park in Fort William: If you buy even the cheapest Scot rail train ticket (a few pounds), you can park for free in the train station car park. We paid 2 GBP per day, for 20 days ☺

We met N&D in Cluanie Inn, which they had reached via the Great Glenn way, in 4 days. We had been hiking for 6 days via Cona Glenn, Sourlies, skirting Knoydart, and then cutting through from Kinloch Hourn to Cluanie Inn. N&D said the Great Glenn variant was not very pleasant, because of all the forestry operations going on. We did see some stunning scenery in the route we took, even the first day, along Cona Glenn is really worth it, so I would recommend against starting in Glenn Finnan if you have the time.

Day 1-3: Fort William – Sourlies:

- On the day from Corryhully to Sourlies, we did not walk in the forest, but via a much better road via Upper Glendessary. One of the only times where we were dangerously off track was when followed the river Finiskaig too closely after crossing it, and were heading down a very steep drop (NM885 945). We had to backtrack to find up a trail that stays much higher above the river, rather than following the small trail immediately next to the burn, heading down a canyon. As of that point, I started to check GPS more often, rather than just relying on my map reading skills ☺

Day 4-6: Sourlies – Cluanie Inn

- When you leave Sourlies, Iain Harper will recommend to stay close to the river, but we were told by people who did the trek before to stay close to the headland, and cut across to the bridge only at the last moment, to avoid the worst of the bogs. We did that, and in the end, didn't even go all the way to the bridge, but waded through, since it was such a hot day, and water was low. With hindsight, since we didn't need the bridge anyway, we'd been much better off if we hadn't crossed the river until the very moment where Iain's route tells you to ascend north a very steep rough slope (point D). As some other hikers told us, the path on the Sourlies side of the river is much easier, and you're walking in the shade, not unimportant, when it is 27 degrees!!

- Iain Harper warns us not to underestimate the stretch from Barisdale to Kinloch Hourn, and he is right, but I want to mention that it is also a very beautiful stretch, so don't rush it.
- At Kinloch Hourn, we left the "CWT Proper" and cut through to Cluanie Lake. We climbed up through the valley of Allt Coire Sgoireadail, to Bealach Coire Sgoireadail – the path was not always clear and the climb was longer than we had anticipated. From there, a good path descend, you cross the river and then an easy 4x4 track takes you through the very remote Wester Glen Quoich Burn. Past a place called Alltbeithe (not to be confused with the youth hostel north of Cluanie Inn with the same name), you turn into Easter Glen Quoich, and can join the Great Glenn Option on Harvey's maps, to reach Cluanie Inn. It seems like a long meandering, adding quite a few extra miles compared to the more classic itineraries, but following advice of a friend, we wanted to enjoy both Knoydart and some of the more remote valleys. This route has the added benefit that you do not have to walk along the falls of Glomach if heights are not your thing.

Day 7-9: Cluanie Inn – Eassan Dorcha

- On Day 7, we didn't need to use the bridge at the youth hostel, but could ford the river, shaving a km off the road. As you go down, aim for a spot where you can cross the fence though 😊
- As advised by some other hikers on this forum, we did go from Maol Bhuidhe to Bendronaig Lodge via the back of Beinn Dronaig and could find our way easily. However, some of the dried out bogs we crossed were really impressive, so not sure how easy this options is a few months earlier.
- We ended up camping near the bridge at NH 017 392, instead of going the 1 km further to Bendronaig Lodge. There are some beautiful camping spots here.
- We cut across to Bearnais Bothy following the route indicated on Harvey's map. It was ok. However, we saw that two other hikers took the more direct route following the shore of the lake Loch an Laoigh, and they were ok too, so if it is sufficiently dry, this is a good option too.
- We could cross the river in Ashnadella. After you have crossed the bridge in the forest, look for a farmer's gate towards your right. Cross towards the island in the river. Then continue in the same direction to come to another farmer's gate where you will be welcomed by 2 dogs that bark but don't bite.
- We had the option to cross into Torridon now, but given the heat, and our fitness level, we thought it would result in a few days that were really too long. So we continued to Eassan Dorcha. It is really a magical place. A tiny bothy, a few camping spots, and a beautiful river with trees. And it is where I got to know the beautiful poem "Leisure" from William H. Davies, as someone wrote it down in the Log book of the bothy.

Day 10-12: Eassan Dorcha - Inverlael

- The stretch from Eassan Dorcha to Kinlochewe is marred by infrastructure works. Very depressing.
- For the last stretch into Kinlochewe, you can chose to take the tarmac road or follow the trail as described. We took the latter because it was a nice break from all the horrible construction road, even though it does not offer much in terms of views. We enjoyed the nature and smaller trails. However, if you are pressed for time, or tired, the road into Kinlochewe is definitely faster and less tiring.

- We had coffee in the hotel/pub at Kinlochewe. Rather unfriendly inn keeper. Difficult to please: absolutely not ok to bring in backpacks, even in the front hall, however, also telling us off for taking our dirty boots off (“This is a walker’s pub”). Anyway, the civilization of a washroom with individual small towels and very nicely smelling soap made the stop worth it 😊
- Leckie Bothy was the longer option with a detour that we take in case the weather was really bad and we wanted a bothy. Weather was ok and we ended up camping along Abhainn Gleann na Muice around NH 065 675 in a bumpy and wet spot - had we walked 30 mins further, we would have found better spots on some grassy patches around the small lochs before Lochan Fada.
- To avoid the “world of boggy pain” as Iain Harper so colourfully describes it, we circumnavigated as he advises to get to Beallach nan Croise. We did see two hikers that followed the more direct route that is also indicated on the Harvey Map, and they were fine, so it’s definitely an option in drier weather.
- We stayed in Clachan farm house in Inverlael (2nd resupply point), and could take an alternative way down. Once we passed Loch an Fhiona, we cut across to catch the beginning of the trail (NH 166 848) indicated on Harvey’s map. This 4x4 road is steep but in good condition and it ends at the entrance of Loch Broom, right next to the Farm house. Definitely a more pleasant option than the CWT proper, as some of the fellow hikers were complaining about how steep and slippery that descent is.

Day 13-15: Inverlael - Inchnadamph

- Once hitting Loch an Daimh, we followed the advice of Iain to cut back along the 4x4 to point E. N&D chose the trail along the Loch, and arrived at the Knockdamph bothy well before us.
- The Crumpets, Coffee and Tee in the hotel in Oykel Bridge were fantastic, so was the warm welcome.
- The day we walked from Knockdamph Bothy to Loch Ailsh was a very wet day. So wet that we decided to camp in a (fishing?) hut along the Oykel River. It was around a place called “Salachy” on the map, the hut is to the right of the trail that is next to the river. While all other huts were locked up, this one was open. 4 people with pack can just fit in, 2 on the ground, 2 on the benches on either side of the hut. If the weather is better, know that there are some nice flat camping spots once you have passed Benmore Lodge (around NC 324 012). This is where we saw 3 young German co-hikers for the last time – we’d seen them several times since we took the ferry together in Fort William. We are still wondering if they made it to Cape Wrath...
- The next stretch, to Inchnadamph was quite wet and rough in places but nothing unfeasible. (Some of the locals had told fellow hikers that it was “unpassable”. They ended up following the A837 for a horrible long stretch to Inchnadamph.) Be careful not to get excited by the trail starting at NC 312 174 on Harvey’s map (finally steady ground..), this trail, towards Dubh Loch Mor really takes you in the wrong direction, you should be heading down.
- Past the pass Breabag Tarsainn, we dropped down too quickly towards the left, and had to climb up a steep slope to get back up to catch the proper trail. So stay high if in doubt.
- If you have time and energy, visit the caves just before you enter Inchnadamph. They are signposted and, according to fellow hikers they are beautiful.
- We were planning on having dinner in Inchnadamph hotel, so we were disappointed when they told us it is only for lodgers. Not sure if that is a policy or a “feature of the day”. The manager was so unfriendly that we didn’t dare to ask.

- We camped just before Inchnadamp, where the trail for the next day starts. There are several good spots there.

Day 16-18: Inchnadamp - Kinlochbervie

- The crossing of Abhainn an Loch Bhig can look quite daunting. We went downstream until the river became much wider and slower flowing (it is wild where you first reach the river). There the crossing was easy.
- We chose for the option through Achfary Forest, which means a long stretch of road. However, a fellow hiker who took the “Ben Dreavie” option said that it was very boggy terrain all along.
- We camped around NC 280 446, again in a rough patch. It seems that a bit further, just after you have passed in between the lakes Loch Airdidh a’Bhaird and Loch an Nighe Leathaid, there are better spots along the shores of Loch Airdh a’Bhaird.

Day 19-20: Kinlochbervie – Cape Wrath

- On Sandwood Bay, some camped already on the north side of the beach, so that they would not be forced to climb up on the headland because of the tide in the morning. We stayed on the south side and had to climb up the headland. Not sure how the camping spots on the north side of the bay are.
- We agree with what Iain writes about the last stage feeling like one of the hardest. For some reason, the route finding was difficult, frustrating and slow. And we were in a hurry because we had been told the bus leaves around noon or shortly after. We made it in time, only to learn that we would get our transfer out only around 3 or 4 pm, after all the day tourists had been brought in and out. The lighthouse and the Ozone Cafe are nice, but also cold and windy, so had we known we would only get our ride out around 4, we would have taken more time to enjoy the actual hike. So I recommend to really try to understand how the bus service operate so that you can time your arrival at the lighthouse better.