



By boots, boat and bike – spicing up the Great Glen Way is easy if you know how...

HILLS by any means!

DITCH THE CAR AND YOU CAN MAKE GETTING TO THE MOUNTAINS PART OF YOUR ADVENTURE...

Words **Phoebe Smith** Photographs **Neil S Price**

Rocking up to your chosen hill-walk in a car is the way most of us access the peaks. We turn off the engine, perch on the lip of the car boot to change into our walking shoes, then head off – the adventure starts **HERE**. But, by choosing an altogether different method of getting to the mountains, you can make the journey to get there just as much of an adventure as the hills themselves.

And that was Trail's mission. To pack in four days of mountain adventures accessing the peaks in as many ways as possible. But where to start? The answer was obvious.

Slicing Scotland's Great Glen in two is the almost knife straight Caledonian Canal. Running 62 miles from northeast to southwest and formed mainly by a geological fault line in the earth's crust, it provides a convenient watery link between Inverness and Fort William, flanked by mouth-watering mountains chained together coast to coast. Along the length of this (and then some) is the Great Glen Way, a waymarked national trail that, due to its low-level towpaths and woodland tracks, is often ignored by hill-walkers. However, rising above it are a smattering of Corbetts, Grahams and Munros – perfect for exploration.

Access to these unsung mountain gems would be easy thanks to the Long Distance Path (LDP) and the water...well that just gave us the perfect way to test the theory that if you want maximum excitement then you have to leave the familiar and get to the hills by any means... >





Our own Loch Ness monster: exploring rugged Meall Fuar Mhonaidh

DAY ONE

MEALL FUAR MHONAI DH *by RIB*

Waves swelled and crashed together casting unfathomable shadows and shapes on the mysterious depths of Loch Ness. Wispy clouds lingered lazily over the dark water, occasionally breaking to reveal the rising slopes of the peaks, then merging together again blotting them out of the landscape like liquid paper. It was like watching an elaborate peep show made up of heather clad slopes and rocky summits teasing us with their presence provocatively.

Standing on the deck of the Fingal, a converted barge that would provide us with floating accommodation on our mission down the length of the Great Glen, I watched this alluring scene moving ever closer to me, my feet itching to get cracking. After following the snaking canal from Inverness past Dalfour canopied by trees, this expanse of open water edged by Scotland's classic bumpy landscape intermittently spied through floating clouds was mesmerising.

Suddenly – I spotted it – a monster! But this was no Nessie, this was Meall Fuar Mhonaidh a pleasingly rugged and notched peak that leapt out of the landscape like a real prehistoric creature, the rocky slabs forming scales on its armoured back.

"Ready to go?" asked Sol, the trainee skipper, who could see my anticipation growing as we crept nearer to the hill. We were about to crank the speed up a gear courtesy of the RIB (Rigid Inflatable Boat) we were towing.

Lifejackets on, drop off and pick up points agreed and OS map firmly in hand we were off! Bouncing across the water James Bond style,

the wind shooting through my hair, Meall Fuar Mhonaidh speeding towards me – I couldn't help but hum the 007 theme tune in my head all the way till Sol cut out the engine and we floated to the shore just past Bunloit where the Gainlaig burn emptied out into the loch. Myself and photographer Neil debarked and, after a scramble up to the road, we located the Great Glen Way.

"What a way to start a hill-walk!" exclaimed Neil as I calmed my now bouffant windswept hair. Adrenaline already pumping we followed the path through the trees, the scent of pine filling my nose, overwhelming my other senses. The ascent was only just starting to kick in but already I felt like I'd had a real hit of adventure.

Weaving through the birch and hazel trees and skirting the river, the excitement of climbing a hill that I'd never even heard of before this morning was mounting in my stomach. Standing at 699m, Meall Fuar Mhonaidh isn't one that peak baggers are eager to tick off. But from Loch Ness it's the most prominent hill for miles, its long summit ridge running almost parallel to the canal beckoning you to come and give it a try.

A thin boot beaten track stretched ahead of me as I followed its shoulder up to the first of several false summits – marked by piles of stones. The sun was out in full force now, its rays reflecting off the looking-glass surface of the loch below illuminating the sky with a white and blue haze.

"Check it out over there," suggested Neil as I stole my gaze from the captivating water and looked west. Rolling hills stretched out as far as I



Who says hills have to be big to be interesting? The wild landscape behind Meall Fuar Mhonaidh.



Climbing high above the loch up to the first of many false summits.



Planning our attack of the Great Glen on Fingal.

could see, pockmarked by hundreds of little lochs sparking in the sunlight. With no roads visible from here it looked distinctly wild and as we reached the true top of Meall Fuar Mhonaidh I made a mental note of a prime wild camp spot I would have to come back and revisit under the flanks of neighbouring Glas-bheinn Mhor.

"Who says hills have to be big to be interesting," I remarked to Neil who, with map in hand, was already plotting an adventurous descent.

"Most people go back the way we came up – because that's where the path is," he explained, "but how about we cut down to forest from here to vary it up," he continued gesturing to the south-eastern slopes of the hill we now stood on. Not relishing repeating old ground I agreed and we picked our way over rocks and through sometimes knee length heather until the contours relented and the ground flattened to an easier gradient.

"Wow – it looks like a completely different peak from here," exclaimed Neil and I turned to be

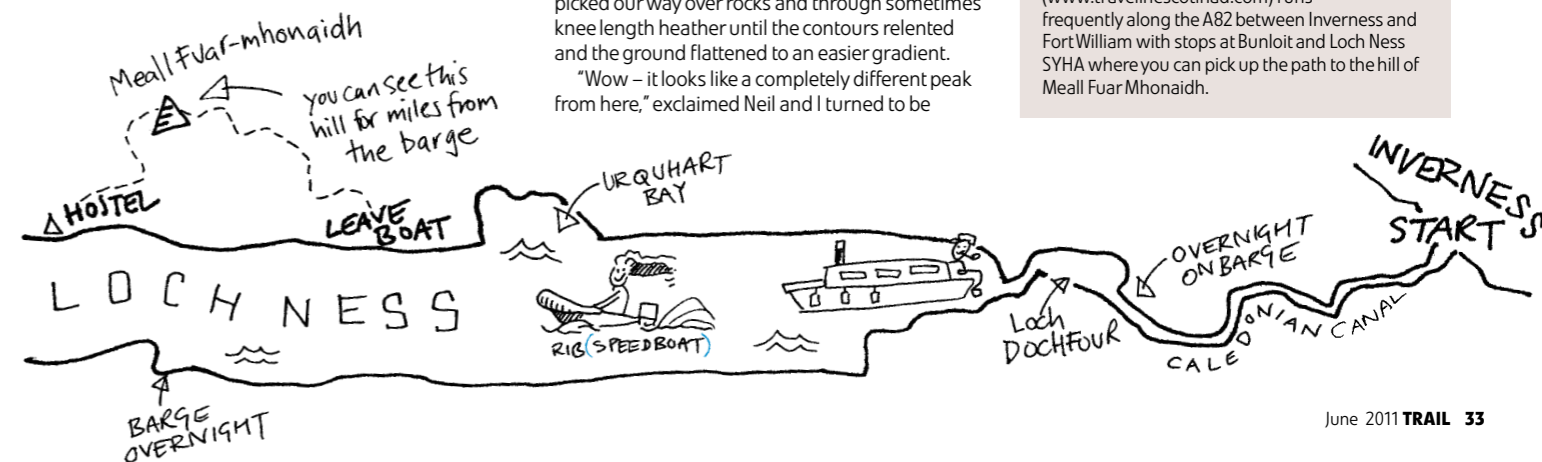
confronted by what looked like a wall of granite slabs stitched together by threads of purple and green undergrowth. I was glad of this fresh perspective – until we reached the deer fence and the band of about 20m of thick forest in front of us.

Exploration was the name of the game so, raising our walking poles in an acknowledgement of the quest ahead, we carefully sneaked under the fence (so not to bend or damage it) and painstakingly picked our way out of the woods and back onto the waymarked track. We had made it – and cut out at least 5km of mindless back tracking. Despite those few minutes of tricky off piste walking we were glad of our decision and as we descended to the hostel on the edge of the loch we looked back on our hilly conquest with smiles fixed firmly on our faces.

"Fingal – this is the explorers we're ready for pickup," I instructed the barge via mobile phone text message. Then I layback and relaxed on this little bit of beach, soaking up the sunshine and eventually the curious looks when a speeding RIB powered towards us and we jumped on – leaving the beast of Meall Fuar Mhonaidh in our wake. ▶

Don't fancy hiring your own RIB?

Scottish City link bus No. 919 (www.travelinescotlnad.com) runs frequently along the A82 between Inverness and Fort William with stops at Bunloit and Loch Ness SYHA where you can pick up the path to the hill of Meall Fuar Mhonaidh.



DAY TWO

CORRIEYAIRACK PASS *by barge and taxi*

BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! The alarm signalled an early start at 0600 hours to take on our next adventure along the Great Glen. With the barge already having transported us a handy distance down Loch Ness we now needed a bit of extra help to get us that bit closer to our preferred hills, this time on the south side of the Caledonian Canal.

Hailing a taxi in a city can be hard, but hailing one in the back of beyond is impossible, so with an army-borrowed precision we had planned our dawn raid on the peaks with a pre-booked set of wheels whose driver kindly dropped us off next to a tiny opening in the wall along the B862.

"Have fun - it does look like rain though..." he murmured as I shut the door and squeezed through the stones and onto the initially well-concealed track.

"Doesn't matter anyway," I said to Neil self-assuredly, "it's a well defined track all the way - let the weather do its worst!"

The track I was referring to was the phonetically satisfying Corrieairack Pass, a winding path that reaches the dizzying heights of 770m - higher than our hill from the previous day. It claws its way up through the clutter of mini lumps and Corbetts clustered on this side of the glen before swooping down into Melgarve on the other side.

A hand painted sign on the gate ahead advised us that we are now on General Wade's Military Road which is a Scheduled Ancient Monument. Though it holds the pleasing Corrieairack moniker as previously mentioned it is also known as a Wade Road - which was built over the top of it by the General of the same name in 1731. This was done so that the British Government's military could



In footsteps of soldiers: the Corrieairack Pass.

pass more easily over the highland terrain and therefore quell the local Jacobite Rebellion.

Though created for necessity rather than pleasure, right now, under the threatening mist that loomed ahead, this pass was a reassuring way to tackle the ascent which was lavishly stretched out over 13km until we reached the highest point.

The higher we climbed the deeper the colours that surrounded us. The greens of the hill flanks became deeper and rich, the blanket of heather a moody amethyst and the greys of the rocks that jutted out on the top of Carn Chuilinn on the other side of Glen Tarff shone with a sheen of polished pewter. A sprawling of burns collide and merge in these hills making the ground off the path saturated with water, the peaks themselves rising like islands in a squelchy peat. Stepping stones and well-built bridges made passing through this a breeze and, before we'd even noticed it, we were at the height of the pass.

"It feels really otherworldly - like we're far from anywhere - which is strange when you consider those," observed Neil, pointing at the power lines that had followed alongside us all the way. I knew what he meant. Out here, surrounded by hills that due to the peat bogs had brown chunks of landslip tearing and scarring their slopes, with no visible towns in the distance, the pylons appeared like futuristic sci-fi sculptures, concocted by a life form that we would never really understand.

Atten-shun! Carefully negotiating the rocks on Carn Leac, enroute to Poll-gormack Hill.

"This pass nearly formed the battlesite for the Jacobite Rising back in 1975."



Seeing as we'd reached the high point we decided to check out a couple of these 'roadside' peaks and opted for the more rocky looking Carn Leac and Poll-gormack Hill - rather than the broader plateau of Corrieairack Hill. At 884m and 806m respectively (questionable Corbetts depending which list you look at) the bulk of the ascent had already taken place so a few steps of bog dodging and rock balancing later and we were on the top. From here we could see the Pass snaking down either side of the road's summit - a place where

rebellion leader Bonnie Prince Charlie had camped back in 1745 while the English commander came from the south. It nearly formed the battle site of the Jacobite Rising, but the Government forces retreated due to the advantageous position of the opposition. It's easy to see the vantage point they had from here, the views stretch on for miles - right back down to the Great Glen and beyond. The colours blending into one at the horizon line, the hills in the foreground standing to attention like saluting soldiers.

A cold breeze began tickling my bare arms and we decided to make our own retreat down to Fort Augustus, to where the barge would now be encamped. Just when the miles were becoming an endless blur Neil spotted something.

"See that?" he asked and left the path. "Come on!" his voice came and I followed him along the burn to a small bothy.

"Great find soldier!" I laughed as we piled inside for a hot drink out of the wind. This was Blackburn of Corrieairack, a MBA maintained one-roomed building, a perfect salvation in bad weather. The scent of old wood lingered in the air and the light from the windows illuminated old bottles on the window as we took a minute to enjoy the shelter.

"Right, back to the officers' mess for some much needed hot dinner," declared Neil and he lead us back out onto the military road once more, heading for our rendezvous point in Fort Augustus to begin planning our next raid on the mountains.



I can see the barge from here! Resting on Carn Leac.



The well-placed Blackburn bothy - perfect for a brew!

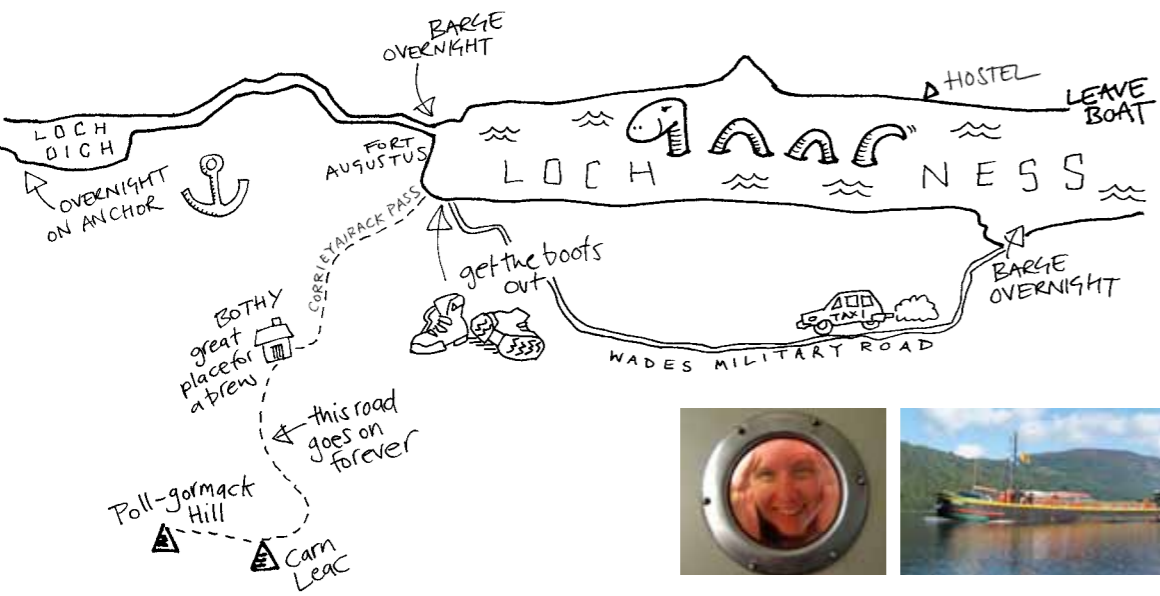
Save the taxi fare!

If you want to check out the Corbetts either side of the Corrieairack Pass then an easy place to start and finish is Fort Augustus. Bringing the car? Park at **NH378093**.



Great Glen made easy!

Trail accessed the Great Glen and its many hills thanks to Fingal's Cruises, who run 4-day and week long trips along the Caledonian Canal. All trips include ensuite accommodation on board, all meals, use of bikes, kayaks and boats and optional guided walks. Contact: www.fingal-cruising.co.uk



DAY THREE

BEN TEE *by canoe*

Magic was already in the air when we woke the next morning in the dawn light to find ourselves floating on anchor in Loch Oich. The ruins of Invergarry Castle protruded fairy-tale like from the trees to the north and a smoky cloud drifted above the water, veiling the view of the canal with a ghostly sheen, but our destination for the day, Ben Tee (meaning 'The Fairy Hill') peeked out above this spell-binding scene, cone-shaped and pointy.

"Canoes ready," shouted skipper Davey as he handed me and Neil our life jackets and paddles. Accessing the hills would be with a 6km canoe-in to take us to the handy locks at Laggan, from where we could continue up the hill.


The lap-lap of our plastic paddles hitting the canal was a therapeutic way to get things started

and by the time we'd twisted round the narrow sections of the waterway to the locks, dodging a couple of early morning cruisers, exchanging pleasantries with fellow canoers and edging ever closer to the pyramidal peak we would climb as we went, we were geared up for our venture.

Heaving the canoe out to store safely under the watchful eye of the lock master, we headed on foot to Kilfinnan where a sign warned us that we were now entering "remote, sparsely populated, potentially dangerous mountain country".

Already pepped up by the canoe in, I felt my heart leap with excitement and we practically bounded up the side of burn soon leaving the trees and warning sign behind. Despite its conical appearance from afar, from our eastern approach

at around 350m, Ben Tee looked more like a raised bump. Appearances can be deceptive though and half an hour on, with any indication of a path now well and truly sunk into the ankle-sucking ground, the sprawling shoulder we were attacking it from, was turning out to be a lot longer that it looked.

"We'll stop for a minute," I said and was immediately glad I did. A huge chunk of the waterway we had been utilising for the past few days stretched out behind, sparkling a cobalt blue despite a darker cloud tracing along it. Pockets of fizzling rain fired down on it like a thousand pin pricks. To the north the hills above Loch Garry sat against the sky like a baleful silhouette and ahead the Allt a' Choire Ghlais burn sliced through the russet coloured valley floor like a hoary engraving. 



"Grey rocky wedges of all shapes and sizes were scattered like breadcrumbs marking the path ahead."



Fairy nice! Truly embracing the power of the Corbetts on top of magical Ben Tee.

CALEDONIAN CAPERS

Teeny hill - with a massive view down the entire Caledonian Canal. Taking it all in on Ben Tee's flanks..



Captivated long enough we tore ourselves from this enchanted panorama and made the push for the summit. As we climbed the rockier it became, with grey wedges of all shapes and sizes scattered like bread crumbs marking the path we should take ahead. The top itself was almost alter-like, with slabs built up in piles and clusters to denote the highest point. Local legend has it that the ruined castle we woke up to on Loch Oich earlier that morning was actually built using these very stones, and that made me smile as I stood arms outstretched on the summit enjoying every minute of being on top of this charismatic little peak.

Because of its isolation from the surrounding hills the views from Ben Tee are captivating – not just in that you can peer all the way back down to Loch Ness, but because the neighbouring peak – Meall a' Choire Ghlais sits dead ahead then forms part of a ridge that wraps round horseshoe like, ending almost parallel to this, the Fairy Hill.

As we made our way back to Laggan, still continuously gawping at the exquisite surrounds – so perfect they seemed like elaborate trickery – I asked Neil if he thought a mere 901m Corbett could ever be this impressive.

"I didn't before," he replied. "But now I can wholeheartedly say 'I believe'."



A pub on a barge - an ingenious way to finish!



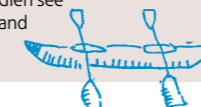
Wild and wonderful: a warning in Laggan.



Paddle power cuts out the walk in to Ben Tee (ahead).

Blazing paddles!

Canoeing the Great Glen is as popular as walking it and they can be hired locally. Remember though – you will need to negotiate the locks – which involves picking the canoe out the water and physically carrying it to the other side – check you can happily do this before committing. For more info on canoeing the Great Glen see www.scottishcanals.co.uk and www.canoescotland.org





Saddle up for a wheely good time on the way to Meall na Teanga.

DAY FOUR

LOCH LOCHY MUNROS *by bike*

Every adventure must end on a high and, in Scotland, you can't get higher than a couple of tasty Munros. Firmly in our sights on our last day were two of these appetising mountain-shaped morsels – Sron a' Choire Ghairbh and Meall na Teanga.

Giving our arms a break from the epic paddle in yesterday, mountain bikes would be our walk-in diminishers today, cutting out a long stretch on the Great Glen Way both before and after our walk. Helmets on and locks packed we zipped down the track, enjoying the feeling of ticking off the first 5km in minutes. Stashing our trusty wheels we took a sneaky short cut through the trees to emerge on a higher track out into hill country.

"We did that in light speed!" said Neil as we already found ourselves tracing the Cam Beallach pass, alongside the trickling stream, barely an hour after leaving Laggan. Though those walking



Stash your bikes in a place you'll remember!

the LDP tend to stick to it religiously, the proximity of these two Munros often proves too tempting a prospect to resist and many will bolt these on their route, even if it means adding an extra day.

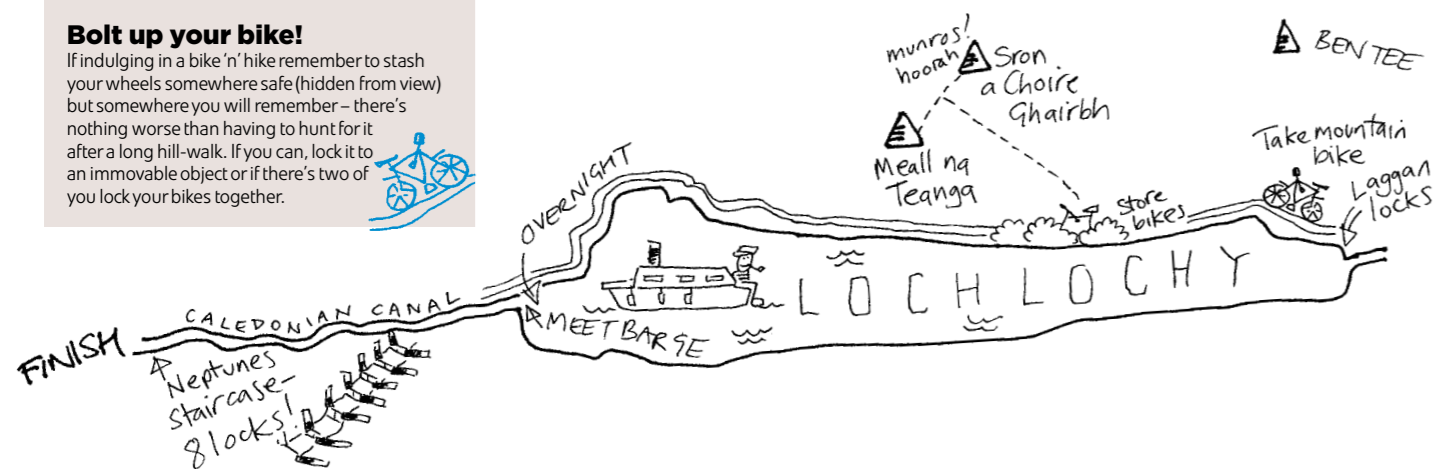
Soon the trees and heather thinned to reveal nothing but solid grassy slopes ahead. Being a peak-bagger's delight due to their height, at the bealach the familiar scarring of footfall showed the way up Sron a' Choire Ghairbh almost right to its summit – which seemed exceedingly odd after spending the last three days on much less frequented hills, though I had to admit that, by now, my legs were glad of the absence of heather.

At the top, across the way Ben Tee greeted us like an old friend – the ridge that this Munro sits at the centre of being the same horseshoe I'd admired from the 'Fairy Hill' the day before. From this side Ben Tee reclaimed its conical appearance once more and the bogs were disguised with its flanks draped ornately with rocks and scree.

Descending to the bealach we passed two Munro baggers – the hills were getting busy.

Bolt up your bike!

If indulging in a bike 'n' hike remember to stash your wheels somewhere safe (hidden from view) but somewhere you will remember – there's nothing worse than having to hunt for it after a long hill-walk. If you can, lock it to an immovable object or if there's two of you lock your bikes together.



"It's meant to rain soon," said one as we crossed paths and exchanged adventures. "By bike? Sounds like a good plan – especially if you're headed to Gairloch – it will be much faster than on foot," another agreed as we explained our plan.

Spying a grey cloud with all the hallmarks of a rainstorm we picked up our pace to take out the second of these Munros, climbing first along the shoulder of Meall Dubh, a strength sapping affair involving sliding on the blackened tar of water-filled boggy footprints, then up a welcome zigzag path onto Meall na Teanga's summit plateau.

There was no denying that rain was on our tail but just before it came in and stole our views, we were sanctioned one final lingering glimpse down the canal. Our whole marathon of hill adventures stretched out for over 70 miles, the memories of barges, RIBs, canoes and bikes as clear in my mind as the summits we'd claimed.

Back at the bikes, we'd escaped from the shroud of grey that had enveloped all the summits, and began our undulating two-wheeled exit to the barge. As I pedalled towards Gairloch, mentally checking off the km in less than half the time it would take to walk them, it hit me that all this was almost over. All that was left is to do was to meander down the canal to Neptune's Staircase, Fort William and the Irish Sea – the end of this Scottish coast to coast. They say life is about the journey not the destination and if this series of action-packed days is anything to go by then they are definitely right.

"Still," I thought as the familiar red, green and yellow barge emerged ahead, "Fort William next you say, and how far will I be from Ben Nevis..."



Munro magic...by any means: summitting Sron a' Choire Ghairbh, yesterday's Ben Tee behind.

HILLS BY ANY OTHER MEANS...

1 Huskies

Think you need snow to take advantage of these canine powerhouses? Not so, they actually train using sledges on wheels – and offer a really unique way of accessing the Cairngorms perfect from John Stewart's Sleddog Centre. You mush and they rush!



2 Steam Train

Chu-choose your perfect route with a trip on an old steamer – like the Welsh Highland Railway in Snowdonia or the Ravenglass and Eskdale Railway in the Lakes, all with ample fellside stops.



3 Horse and Trap

They're not called pony tracks or bridleways for nothing – there was a time when horse and cart was the only way to the peaks. Giddy up at Ireland's Gap of Dunloe to access Macgillycuddy's Reeks east end.

