





# Time and tide

PHOTOGRAPHY: DAVID HODGSON; FIFE COAST AND COUNTRYSIDE TRUST; IDA MASPERO; KEN BARRY

THE REGION'S GREATEST OUTDOOR DRAW, THE FIFE COASTAL PATH CONNECTS THE VARIED VISTAS OF THE KINGDOM'S COAST, FROM CHARMING EAST NEUK VILLAGES AND WEATHERED CLIFFTOP RUINS TO DRAMATIC ROCK FORMATIONS AND REMOTE BEACHES. IDA MASPERO SETS OUT TO EXPLORE

A break in the cloud on a blustery autumn day, and as the path rounds a headland, light falls on the orange crescent of a small, sandy cove, the ivy-covered ruin of a stone cottage perched at its far end. There's not a soul in sight; to our left lie golden, late-summer barley fields and to our right a temperamental, green-grey sea. After a rest on the sand, we follow the path through lush burn-side woodland before leaving it to catch a bus from Boarhills back to our starting point in Crail. We're damp from head to toe after a day traipsing through lashings of rain, skirting golf courses, tracing rocky shores and sandy coves.

This leg of the coastal path, between Crail and St Andrews, is known as its most remote. Whereas the path further south and west joins the quaint East Neuk villages – Elie, St Monans, Pittenweem, Anstruther, Crail – like a string of multicoloured glass beads with just a few miles between them, this bit has an altogether wilder, more exposed feel.

Merely a week earlier, beneath the blazing sun of an uncharacteristically hot September's

day, I'd been climbing up a cliff with just my sweaty grip on a heavy chain to steady me. The Elie Chain Walk between Shell Bay and Earlsferry is one of the UK's few *via ferratas*. Apparently built in the 1920s, its stainless steel chains were renewed in 2007. At dead low tide, wide ledges of dark volcanic rock provide an easy route beneath the cliffs of Kincaig Point, but as the water rises, the eight chains support scrambles over large ribs of rock and along walls. The alternative high tide route along the clifftop is breathtakingly scenic, with views over wide sands to the twin villages of Earlsferry and Elie.

At the Earlsferry end of the Chain Walk, perfectly rounded, black pebbles clink-clank like metal balls underfoot as we cross the small cove at low tide – I was later told that rangers call this cove 'dinosaur egg beach'. Certainly this spot feels very prehistoric –

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Golden sand, black rock (clockwise from top): mountain biking the path between Elie and Anstruther; a chain walk scramble with toddler; black pebbles of volcanic rock on 'dinosaur egg beach' near Earlsferry

impressive basalt columns soar above, remnants of Carboniferous volcanic activity. The lava landscape of Kincaig Point is just one of many geologically fascinating spots along the coastal path. Further north and east, the path passes a number of spectacular sandstone formations sculpted by millennia of wind and weather – Caipie Caves between Anstruther and Crail; Buddo Rock and the Rock and Spindle between Boarhills and St Andrews. Here and there on rocky shores, fossils may be found too – no wonder the coastal path is popular for geology walks.

Between Elie and St Monans, the path passes right by two medieval castles, Ardsross and Newark. Perched impressively on the clifftop, their picturesque ruins still gaze out to sea. Equally strategically placed are the myriad of WWII bunkers encountered along the length of the route – this is coastal scenery spiced with dramatic remnants of history.

In contrast to the remote shores north of Crail and the charming fishing ports of the East Neuk leg, the southwestern stretches along the Firth of Forth are more built up and, **D**

**D** along the newest extension between North Queensferry and Kincardine, quite industrial. Having explored the coastal path over a number of day walks down the years, I have been struck by how varied and full of character its landscapes are. But they are bound together by themes of heritage and geology ... and the timeless sea, in all its sparkling blue and stormy grey guises.

**FIFE'S FLAGSHIP**

Billed as a long distance trail and designated one of Scotland's Great Trails by Scottish Natural Heritage (SNH), the Fife Coastal Path nevertheless lends itself perfectly to day walks – with regular local buses connecting points along the route, there is no need to retrace steps or leave a vehicle at each end. Indeed, in 2007 the Fife Coast and Countryside Trust (FCCT) commissioned a user and impact survey – probably the most comprehensive study of its kind at the time for a long distance route in the UK – which confirmed that the majority of users on the path are day walkers.

The study also showed that the coastal path is not only a big draw for visitors, but a big earner for Fife. It reported around half a million walkers a year, generating an annual income of between £24 and 28 million.

“Given the number of users and the economic benefits it brings to Fife, the coastal path is the Trust's biggest priority. It's a huge asset, a flagship,” confirms Amanda McFarlane, the FCCT's Chief Executive.

Maintaining, managing and expanding Fife's greatest outdoor asset is now a coordinated effort which prompted the creation of the FCCT in 2002. The Trust, under the leadership of McFarlane, immediately set to work linking up pre-existing little stretches of coast path which had been under the auspices of Fife Council or the former Scottish Enterprise Fife. “Those two organisations were behind the vision for the path and its early development. But having two bodies involved gave rise to discrepancies in, for example, the waymarking and orientation panels.”

The formation of the FCCT and official launch of the route in 2003 brought a joined-up approach in the practical management and branding of the route. “The first thing we did was to come up with a new, very distinctive



East Neuk jewels: aerial view of St Monans (above); passing through Pittenweem (below)

Liaison with landowners is a key part of the rangers' role. With most of the land crossed being in private ownership – some 22 golf courses, along with farms, estates and private individuals – maintenance of the path is dependent on the goodwill and support of landowners. “If part of the path falls in, for example, we work with the landowners to create an alternative route inland,” says McFarlane. “The rangers are our first point of contact, our go-between with landowners and our maintenance team. They smooth things over.”

While waymarking along the route is generally good, the orientation panels at key starting points are a different matter, admits McFarlane: “Some look very tired, and their styles differ due to the previous split management. But now we finally have the funds to replace all the orientation panels – it will make a massive difference.”

**Quick facts**

- The Fife Coastal Path currently runs 110 miles between Kincardine on the Firth of Forth to Newport on Tay, with an extension to Newburgh set to open this winter.
- As a multi-day walk, it is usually completed in five to six days. However, day walkers account for most of its use.
- There are 49 'Welcome Ports' along the route – businesses within 500m of the path that welcome walkers and provide toilet facilities.
- Local bus services connect most of the route, meaning you don't have to retrace your steps on a linear day walk.

**“MAINTENANCE OF THE PATH IS DEPENDENT ON THE GOODWILL AND SUPPORT OF LANDOWNERS”**

logo for the path.” Indeed, its wavy lines of blue, yellow and green – echoing the seashore – is now instantly recognisable on signposts.

From day to day, five of the Trust's countryside rangers are at the front line of maintaining the path. The rangers carry out regular surveys of their designated sections, and pass on instructions for any repairs required to the FCCT maintenance team, which is also responsible for putting temporary diversions in place when, for example, a patch of path has washed away.

**TWO WHEELS TOO**

Back on the clifftop beyond Elie, we're overtaken by cyclists and it strikes me how perfectly suitable much of the coastal path is for mountain bikes – note to self: come back on bike. “I think the path offers more to mountain bikers than might first be perceived.” agrees Edinburgh rider David Hodgson, who has explored several sections with friends. “It's especially true the further east you go. The bit from Inverkeithing to Burntisland is really easy, so suitable for riders of all abilities, but my favourite section is **D**





## Essentials



The official website of the Fife Coastal Path offers route and facilities information, downloadable maps, events listings and an accommodation directory. [www.fifecoastalpath.co.uk](http://www.fifecoastalpath.co.uk)

For tidal stretches such as the Elie Chain Walk, check tide times when planning your walk ([www.easytide.ukho.gov.uk](http://www.easytide.ukho.gov.uk)).

### TRANSPORT

The Fife coast is well served by public transport, meaning day walkers can plan a one-way linear trip pretty easily. Local bus services ([www.stagecoachbus.com](http://www.stagecoachbus.com)) connect most places, including the East Neuk villages, while rail links between North Queensferry, Kirkcaldy, Leuchars, Dundee and beyond connect it to the Central Belt and rest of Scotland ([www.scotrail.co.uk](http://www.scotrail.co.uk)).

### MULTI-DAY AND GUIDED WALKS

Planning a long distance walk along the path yourself is straightforward. Find places to stay at ([www.visitfife.com/accommodation](http://www.visitfife.com/accommodation)). However, a clutch of operators offer organised holidays and support services. Fife Coastal Path Holidays ([www.walkingfifecoastalpath.com](http://www.walkingfifecoastalpath.com)), based in Pittenweem, can arrange a full package, or just accommodation or luggage transport, depending on preferences. Macs Adventure ([www.macsadventure.com](http://www.macsadventure.com)) also offers supported walking holidays of between three and seven days.

To explore the geology of the path with a knowledgeable guide, Angus Miller of Geowalks ([www.geowalks.demon.co.uk](http://www.geowalks.demon.co.uk)) offers a programme of one-day walks and holidays.

Scotland's Great Trails, a Scottish Natural Heritage initiative, comprises 20 long distance routes. More information at [www.bit.ly/greattrails](http://www.bit.ly/greattrails)

### MAPS AND GUIDEBOOKS

Cordee ([www.cordee.co.uk](http://www.cordee.co.uk)) publishes a map for the path. Hamish Brown's *Along the Fife Coastal Path*, published by Birlinn ([www.birlinn.co.uk](http://www.birlinn.co.uk)) contains in-depth information about history and heritage. There's also *The Fife Coastal Path – A Guide for Walkers* by Gilbert Campbell ([www.walkthefifecoastalpath.co.uk](http://www.walkthefifecoastalpath.co.uk)). The FCCT's own guidebook comes out this winter ([www.fifecoastandcountrysidetrust.co.uk](http://www.fifecoastandcountrysidetrust.co.uk)).

► Leven to Anstruther. Not just for the riding, but for the scenery and the sense of history – on the bike you can cover a lot of ground quickly, leaving time to stop off and have a look around interesting places such as the 18th-century salt pans and windmill at St Monans.

"From Anstruther to Crail the path is single-track and great fun, never too challenging," says Hodgson's riding companion Phillip Taylor. But as the path crosses more remote terrain further north, it's best suited to more capable riders, he feels. Picking a section to match your ability is the secret, as is carefully planning the return route if you want to make it circular. "The downside is how to make a suitable loop for a day," Hodgson points out. "The use of roads, albeit minor ones, seems to be needed." However, for Hodgson and his companions, the coastal path by mountain bike is an experience they don't hesitate to recommend.

### BEST FOOT FORWARD

Though it now traces an unbroken outline of the Fife coast over 110 miles, the Fife Coastal Path is by no means cast in stone, and it continues to evolve. This summer saw the launch of the south-western extension from North Queensferry to Kincardine, while the finishing touches are currently being put to a northern extension from the Tay Bridge to Newburgh. "This will be quite a remote stretch," says McFarlane, "a different experience to the rest of the route. Rather than hugging the coastline, it cuts inland and goes up hills, so



Varied vistas (clockwise from above): the Caiplie Caves between Anstruther and Crail; a ranger-led school walk at Aberdour; exploring the ruins of Newark Castle and the nearby doocot

you get some great views." She admits this deviation from the shore is not by design, but necessitated by access restrictions along the Tay estuary.

Ultimately, the plan is to extend the path beyond Fife and around the northern shores of the Tay estuary – from Newburgh up to Perth and around to Dundee. "This will add to SNH's Scottish Coastal Ways initiative – the vision for a route all the way around the coast of Scotland," explains McFarlane.

Along with new orientation panels on the ground, walkers can look forward to the first official coastal path guidebook, due for publication around Christmas time. Comprehensive yet pocket-sized, the Trust sees this as a valuable business opportunity to expand its 'Welcome Ports' business partnership scheme. And in a bid to encourage younger people onto the path, the Trust is embracing modern multimedia and technology: it is planning the development of smartphone apps to bring interactive audio guides to people's phones, and is working with Fife Historic Buildings Trust to fit webcams to their buildings that will capture wildlife along the path. "We're eager to encourage young people and families onto the path," explains McFarlane, "so we need to be innovative and use modern technology to make it more interactive and fun."

Though its guardians are brimming with positive plans for its future, the path remains beholden to the power of the sea. "Coastal erosion is a very real challenge – we have some very tricky hotspots," acknowledges McFarlane. "There is no way we can fight nature – we need to work with it. That means bringing the path inland as the coast erodes." Nevertheless, the Fife Coastal Path will continue to enchant as it traces shores shaped by the passage of time and the whim of the tides. ■