

WATER WORLD

A scenic view from the deck of a boat on the Caledonian Canal. The boat has a wooden deck and a green and yellow painted edge. A person is lying down on the deck, and several colorful kayaks (pink, red, green) are visible. In the background, there are snow-capped mountains and a blue sky. The water is dark blue with some whitecaps.

A MAN-MADE MARVEL RICH IN HISTORY, THE CALEDONIAN CANAL RUNS THROUGH THE HEART OF THE SPECTACULAR GREAT GLEN. AND, AS **IDA MASPERO** DISCOVERS, CRUISING ALONG IT IS THE PERFECT WAY TO EXPLORE THE WONDERFUL HIGHLAND SCENERY

TRAVEL CALEDONIAN CANAL



Just cruising: Fingal of Caledonia on Loch Lochy with Ben Nevis in the distance (opposite); awaiting passage through Laggan Locks (left)

WE HAVE STOPPED FOR LUNCH on a hilltop among swathes of heather dressed in glorious purple. A magnificent panoramic view stretches all around: to the south-west lie Lochs Oich and Lochy with Ben Tee towering loftily above – a string of water and mountain all the way to Loch Linnhe and Ben Nevis. To the north-east lies the dark mass of Loch Ness, dotted on this breezy day with the white of yacht sails. Behind us, Glen Buck, clad in Scots pine and birch woodland; and below, a slightly S-shaped curve runs beside the river Oich – a section of the Caledonian Canal.

The mighty Great Glen cuts through the Highlands between Fort William and Inverness, a deep geological fault in the earth's crust marked by a chain of lochs, like a perforated line. Here you will find ample historic interest and a mosaic of iconic Scottish landscapes – an ever-changing dynamic of mountain, woodland and water.

The Glen is made even more dramatic by the feat of engineering that stretches along its length – the Caledonian Canal, surely the UK's most remarkable and evocative inland waterway. Its design cleverly exploits the Glen's series of lochs with only 22 miles of the 62 mile-long navigable waterway between Inverness and Fort William being artificial. The rest comprises four natural lochs linked by short sections of canal and 29 locks.

Designed by engineer Thomas Telford and constructed in stages between 1803 and 1847, the Canal was intended to link the west and east coasts of Scotland, allowing trading ships and Navy vessels to avoid the treacherous passage around the Pentland Firth and Cape Wrath. Its locks, spectacularly stacked in 'staircases' at Banavie, Fort Augustus and Muirtown, were, at 46m long, massive for the period, designed to accommodate the Navy's largest

ships. However, by the time it was finally complete, the advent of steam had diminished the Canal's strategic importance.

Yet it remained in continuous use, attracting sightseers in their droves. These days, the Canal remains a popular attraction and a convenient shortcut between east and west for leisure vessels of all descriptions. And as I recently discovered first-hand, sailing along it is simply the most enchanting mode to travel the Great Glen and truly appreciate the way in which land folds around water.

"The Great Glen Way, the way-marked walking route, is well-known, but there are so many other exciting means of exploring the Glen and getting under its skin," says Martin Balcombe, owner and skipper of the barge Fingal of Caledonia. There are actually three Great Glen Ways –

WAYS TO GO

CRUISING ABOARD FINGAL OF CALEDONIA

www.fingal-cruising.co.uk

ALL ABOUT THE GREAT GLEN WAYS

www.greatglenway.com

Includes ranger-led events and accommodation listings

WATER SPORTS AND ACTIVITIES, LOCH OICH

www.monsteractivities.com

◀ a walking route, cycle tracks and waterway, but the Canal is the focus of all three.

EXPLORE YOUR OWN WAY

A week on board Fingal of Caledonia, cruising from Banavie near Fort William to Muirtown by Inverness (or vice versa), takes in all of the Glen at a leisurely pace, with plenty of time and scope to take part in a range of outdoor activities. The day before our view-laden hill walk, three of us had been mountain biking in Glen Garry, the trail running beside a tumbling salmon river fringed with oakwood.

Others had paddled in Canadian canoes along the Canal or walked along Laggan Avenue, Telford's tree-lined canal path. After lunch, in the steady afternoon breeze, a few of us pottered around on Loch Oich in dinghies, me in a red Topper identical to the one I sailed as a child. Over dinner the previous evening, my fellow guests had marvelled at their sighting of two ospreys the day before.

No doubt the Great Glen offers enough to keep outdoor enthusiasts of all kinds happily occupied for a week or more. Opportunities for walking abound, with the low-level Great Glen Way and General Wade's 18th century military road as obvious draws. Those seeking something more strenuous can head for one of the many Munros in the area.

And there is plenty of scenic biking to be had, too, from towpaths for a relaxed pedal to a multitude of forestry tracks and the network promoted as the Great Glen Mountain Bike Trails (the official, long-distance Great Glen Cycle Route for touring bikes was withdrawn in 2006). Add to that a variety of water sports – the Canal is a canoe and kayak touring favourite and its lochs are perfect for dinghy sailing and windsurfing – and it's unlikely you'll run out of things to do.

Exploring and experiencing the Glen through a range of activities is what a journey aboard Fingal of Caledonia is all about. The brightly-painted barge, rescued and renovated 12 years ago by Martin and his business partner, carries mountain bikes, Canadian canoes, windsurfers, Topper dinghies and a traditional Falmouth Bass Boat.

Fingal's crew include ever-helpful outdoor instructors and days are planned in such a way as to give variety, yet keep things flexible. The barge makes an ideal base for adventures

Peaceful paddle: the Fletcher family explore Loch Oich by Canadian canoe (right); view-laden walk on the surrounding heather-clad hills (below); leisure craft negotiate the flight of locks at Fort Augustus (top right)



“THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT BEING ON WATER... YOU REALLY *FEEL* YOUR SURROUNDINGS”



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Community canal boating on the Union

SEAGULL TRUST CRUISES

www.seagulltrust.org.uk

Cruising for the disabled on the Forth & Clyde, Union and Caledonian Canals

PHOTOGRAPHY: GAVIN HOWAT; CALEDONIAN DISCOVERY; IDA MASPERO

SCOTLAND'S FOUR CANALS



The Caledonian Canal might be the most spectacular of them all, but each of Scotland's three other waterways has something unique in terms of boating, history and scenery. Once integral to trade, they now offer interesting ways to explore the countryside.

The shortest, the nine-mile Crinan Canal in mid-Argyll, connects Loch Fyne with the Sound of Jura, saving vessels the arduous journey around the Mull of Kintyre and providing access to the isles. Completed in 1809, it was a key cargo route in its heyday, and today 'Britain's most beautiful shortcut', as it is known, is very popular with yachts and other leisure craft.

Scotland's oldest waterway is the Forth & Clyde Canal at the heart of the Central Belt. Begun in 1768 and completed in 1790, it connects the Clyde, at Glasgow, with the Forth estuary at Grangemouth – a navigable passage between the Atlantic and the North Sea. A flight of 11 locks at Falkirk originally connected the Forth & Clyde with its sister waterway, the 32 mile-long Union Canal, completed in 1822 to provide a direct link to Edinburgh city centre.

However, after the advent of railways for passenger travel and freight, both canals fell out of use and were neglected for many decades. At the turn of the century, they were given a new lease of life through Britain's largest canal restoration programme, the £78 million Millennium Link project. The show-stopping centrepiece of the project was the construction of the now famous Falkirk Wheel, the world's only rotating boat lift, which re-connected the two canals (the original locks were dismantled in the 1930s).

Since their restoration and re-opening, the Forth & Clyde and Union Canals have proved unique amenities for the Central Belt – their towpaths are used by walkers and cyclists, and increasing numbers of people are able to enjoy the waterways by boat.

"The Union provides a valuable green belt in a densely populated part of Scotland," says Sam Baumber, co-founder and Chairman of community canal boat enterprise Re-Union. "By cruising on the canal or using the towpath, you discover hidden bits of countryside right on the doorstep."



as it travels the length of the Glen, and going ashore for biking or walking is made easy. "Each of our guests makes their own experience," explains Martin. "Doing what they enjoy, they can discover the beauty of the Glen in their own way – that's our philosophy."

The high number of returning guests is testament to the appeal of Martin's approach. For the Fletcher family from Oxfordshire – Paul, Jenny and their teenage kids Tim and Fiona – a week aboard Fingal makes a great family holiday because "we can each do our own thing by day and meet up in the evening," explains Jenny. "Tim is up for every challenge and likes to push himself, so he makes the most of the activities, while we might want to take it easy. You can be as active or relaxed as you like."

Meanwhile, Londoner Mark Stroud and his daughter Molly are visiting the Highlands for the first time, and to them the Glen is living up to all their expectations of awesome Scottish scenery. "It's as I imagined it, and more," says Mark.

For Gavin Howat, an avid canoeist from East Kilbride and regular guest aboard Fingal, the magic is in experiencing the Glen from the water. "There is something about being on water ... you really feel your surroundings." And it's hard not to agree. A journey on water through Scotland's mightiest glen brings an entirely fresh perspective. ■

