



# BONGO TRAVELS

FUN, COOL AND COSY, A CAMPERVAN CAN ALSO BE A REAL FOUL-WEATHER FRIEND, AS RICHARD ROWE DISCOVERS ON A WINDSWEPT TRIP TO GLEN AFFRIC

**THE MOUNTAIN WEATHER** Information Service forecast for a proposed long-weekend trip to the Glen Affric area did not bode well. "Gales, widely severe, even hurricane force on higher areas and widespread rain, heavy or torrential for periods. Very difficult conditions even at low level, with any mobility widely impossible on higher areas."

It was late-October and we had planned to spend a few days exploring one of Scotland's most celebrated glens. Swathed in layers of ancient Caledonian forest, Glen Affric is wonderfully easy on the eye, particularly when dressed in the colours of autumn. It also serves as a gateway to some seriously rugged backcountry that we couldn't wait to get our teeth into.

Despite the gloomy predictions, we headed north in good spirits, hoping this would be an occasion when the forecasters had got it wrong. Our optimism was also fuelled by a change in the usual sleeping arrangements. Rather than spending the nights under canvas, we had arranged to collect a campervan from a hire company near Inverness.

"You've picked a good weekend for it," smiled Catherine Bunn from Highland Campervans when we arrived to collect our home for the next few days – a wonderfully-named Mazda Bongo. Ominously, the wind had already picked up and begun to tug at the Bongo's pop-up roof that Catherine had elevated ahead of our arrival.

Trusty stead: our home for the trip

PHOTOGRAPHY: HIGHLAND CAMPERVANS; NATURAL HIGH GUIDING

## WILD AFFRIC



There are several way-marked trails in Glen Affric and longer low-level walks around lochs Benin a' Mheadhoin and Affric, but to really appreciate the imposing landscape you need to step further into the hills.

### MUNRO MAGIC: TOM A' CHOINICH

Starting from Chisholm Bridge, take the stalker's path that follows the north side of Abhainn Gleann nam Fiadh into the 'wild glen of the deer' – where Tom a' Choinich rises before you. The real climb begins with the old trail that heads north alongside the Allt Toll Easa. As the gradient eases at about 650m, the trail splits. Branch west directly up the southeast ridge of Creag na h-Inghinn, which leads all the way to the summit (1,112m). On a clear day, you can see both coasts. The route back heads east along a narrow trail to the Bealach Toll Easa and then southeast to retrace your steps.

### LOOMING LARGE: SGURR NA LAPAICH

Sgurr na Lapaich (1,036m) is the commanding mountain seen from the Affric car park (and the outlying top at the end of the long southeast ridge from Mam Sodhail). Take the stalker's path north of Affric Lodge leading up towards Am Meallan. Leave the wide track just after the switchback and head northwest to cross the Allt na Faing, following a west fork onto the broad east ridge. This in turn leads to a col and good snack stop before taking a steeper northwest route to the summit. However, be careful in winter: the route skirts close to the often heavily-corniced northeast face. If feeling really fit, then a round of the Affric horseshoe taking in Mam Sodhail, Carn Eige, An Lethchreag and Tom a' Choinich is also possible. Just be sure to allow at least seven hours.

### BACKCOUNTRY ADVENTURES: TAKE YOUR PICK

Options to step further off the beaten track open up just around the glen. An ascent of An Tudair (1,074m) and on to Mam Sodhail, returning via Sgurr na Lapaich, is a strenuous but rewarding excursion, while the hills to the south also provide great wild walking. Try this: from Affric car park, take the lower estate road. Immediately after the bridge over Allt Garbach, leave the track heading south to pick up a faint trail following the west side of the burn through fantastic Caledonian forest. The trail heads west gaining height towards Na Cnapain before petering out. Continue to Carn a' Choire Ghairbh (865m), looking out for golden eagles soaring on the thermals. Return the same way or extend the day to include Aonach Shasuinn (888m).

With thanks to Tim Francis

Not as well-known as the more ubiquitous VW camper, Bongos are increasingly seen touring the highways and byways of Scotland. And it is easy to see why. Although compact, the van is able to seat four adults and plenty of kit during the day, before converting into a cosy camper at night. The seating in the main van area pulls out to create a comfortable double bed, while there is space for two more in the elevated roof section – at least when the wind's not blowing a hoolie.

Fully converted with all mod cons, our Bongo came complete with a fridge, double-hob stove top, sink, cupboards and even a heater. It looked ideal for a short break with kids, or in our case just two adults with far too much gear.

### FIRST STOP: STRATHCONON

Having been given an introductory tour of the van by Catherine and attached bikes to a very high-tech looking bike rack, we set off in fading light, grinning at the prospect of our mini adventure. We headed west aiming for Strathconon where the plan was to park up ahead of a cycle the next day.

All went smoothly until we overshot a turn and had to spin around in what seemed like plenty of space. By this time, however, the heavens had opened and the wind was slamming against the sides of the van. I reversed carefully, not able to see much out the back. But it was not careful enough. We stopped with a crunch when the bike rack – ah, the rack, I'd forgotten about that – hit a post, cracking one of its lights and leaving another dangling from a socket. We had been in the Bongo less than an hour. Not an auspicious start.

Feeling suitably stupid and already rehearsing our apologies to Catherine, we headed into Strathconon, the trees blowing almost double over the single-track road ahead. After a few miles, we came to a stop again, this time behind another car. Up ahead, the driver stared forlornly at a birch tree that had been thrown across the road.

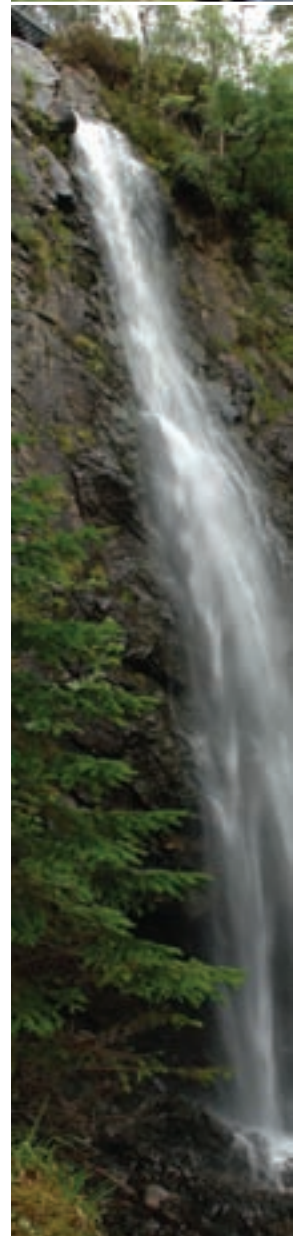
We tried shifting it together, but it was not for budging. We were just about to beat a retreat when we were saved by a man in a pick-up coming the other way. Clearly well-used to such impromptu obstacles, he swiftly turned around and headed back to borrow a chainsaw from a neighbour. Five minutes later, we were all on our way.

Our parking spot for the night seemed sensible enough, although in the dark and driving rain it was hard to tell. Given the conditions outside, we were more than happy to be in a van rather than a tent, but even so our first night wasn't exactly a triumph. Not yet accustomed to the campervan shuffle – that supposedly effortless shift from day to night use – we flailed around trying to find a home for mountains of gear, food and other provisions that hadn't been put away properly when we collected the van.

Eventually we managed to pull the bed out, but ended up sleeping the wrong way round, with heads and pillows falling off the end and totally forgetting to attach the thermal covers to the front and rear windows. It was a tempestuous night – both inside and out.

### WHEN THE WIND BLOWS

As ever when pitching up somewhere at night, it is not until the next day that you discover how smart a choice you have made. Fortunately, we were not blocking anyone's driveway





Breaking cover: planning a route during a rare lull in the rain (above); Plodda Falls on a less windy day (below); plenty of room in the Bongo (right)

but were instead parked out of the way opposite a dam at the head of Loch Meig. That explained everything. The roaring sound that had kept us awake was not wind but the sound of water plunging from the outfall of the dam.

Daylight also offered a chance to put our kit away properly and get to grips with the Bongo. Trekking poles, boots and other walking gear tucked neatly behind the bed, now folded back into a seating position; pillows and sleeping bags fitted perfectly into the cupboards; and fresh food was stowed in the fridge.

Slowly but surely, the van started to work its magic – beginning by delivering a plate of hot food. Now while it's perfectly possible to rustle up a good breakfast in a tent, there was something very civilised about sitting warm and snug inside a van, tucking into a plate of breakfast burritos amidst the waft of freshly-brewed coffee.

Outside, it was brighter, but the wind was still howling so cycling was out, at least for the morning. It was just as well: the somewhat shambolic start to the trip continued when

we discovered one of the bikes had a flat and we had left the pump in our car back at Catherine's. We decided to cross the dam and head back to a bike shop in nearby Strathpeffer.

On the way, we detoured for a stroll through Torrachilty Forest near Contin – a favourite playground of local mountain bikers and walkers. We only wanted a quick leg-stretcher, so opted for a circuit around the View Rock trail, enjoying glimpses across to Loch Achilty in between hefty showers of rain and sleet.

Back at the van, we made our way to Strathpeffer, picked up a pump and set off again, fully intending to enjoy a low-level cycle in Glen Affric. However, by the time we neared the Affric car park, the already strong wind had ratcheted up a couple of extra notches. Cycling – or even walking – anywhere promised to be truly miserable, so there was only one thing for it: it was time for more food.

Cradling mugs of warming soup, we began to relax into what was a refreshingly different pace – what might be called 'Bongo time'. For once this was no snatched weekend

under canvas, with pressure to head out whatever the weather; we could sit back and take it easy. If the weather was rubbish, so be it. Warm, dry and now with plenty of room to move around, there was no need to go anywhere.

A few brave souls turned up in cars and headed off into the gloom, leaning forward at improbable angles to counter the wind. Rather than try anything quite so rash, we spent much of the afternoon hunkered down, just chatting, reading and watching the clouds scud across the glen, until one by one the few remaining cars drove off and we were left alone in the encroaching dark.

## VENTURING OUT

If anything, the weather the following morning was even worse, but with a good sleep under our belts we were determined to venture out. A local mountain guide, Tim Francis from Natural High Guiding, had offered to take us high into the nearby hills later, but as the van rocked from another gust of wind, that seemed a non-starter. Eager for some activity but feeling certain that a walk was off the cards, we decided there was just enough time for a more sheltered cycle around Loch Beinn a' Mheadhoin.

Ducking in and out of pristine Caledonian forest, it proved to be a scenic if soggy ride. Half-way along the track on the south side of the loch, we came across a lone walker – a quixotic character with shaggy beard, baggy shorts and wooden staff. He was heading west to Loch Duich in Kintail, wild camping all the way. Drenched and having almost lost his tent in the wind the night before, he nonetheless remained admirably cheery. We felt a little guilty about the prospect of returning to our warm and dry Bongo.

We arrived back just in time to meet Tim, although the look on his face told us what we already knew: we weren't going anywhere – at least, not high up. Although disappointed not to be able to share his passion for the many peaks on his home patch, he hadn't given up. "I know just the place on a day like this," he said, pointing on his map to nearby Plodda Falls – a mighty waterfall deep in the heart of the forest.

## "DUCKING IN AND OUT OF PRISTINE CALEDONIAN FOREST, IT PROVED TO BE A SCENIC IF SOGGY RIDE"



On your bike: Glen Affric offers more than just great walking (top); parked up at Torrachilty Forest (right)

We headed back down the glen in convoy, casting an eye at the River Affric raging in the ravine below. Once past the car park at Dog Falls – usually full of people, but empty today – we pressed on through Tomich to a parking area amongst the trees in Guisachan Forest.

The landscape here is on a particularly grand scale with giant redwoods and Douglas firs – planted by the then landowner Lord Tweedmouth in the 1900s – thrusting skywards, jostling with native species. And then you reach the falls themselves. With a 40m drop, they must be impressive even on a dry day, but swollen by so much rainfall, the falls had been transformed into a roaring, boiling cascade that crashed down with astonishing violence.

The old iron bridge spanning the top of the falls was closed for repair, so we headed to a viewing area opposite the plunge pool far below. But getting close wasn't easy: with the wind still gusting, sections of the waterfall were being pushed backwards towards the bridge, while the force of the water hitting the rocks at the base of the falls delivered a Niagara-like spray.

As we marvelled at the force of the water frothing around us, Tim pointed to the iron railings on the other side of the river that marked an old trail to another much closer look-out point used by dare-devil Victorians. Not today, we thought, and headed back along a trail that snaked beneath giant trees.

Back at the van, we parted company with Tim, vowing to join him another time for a high-level walk. And stepping inside our little haven of comfort, the door sliding shut on yet another gust of rain-lashed wind, we also made a mental note to start saving for a campervan. After all, the Bongo had rescued the weekend. If we'd been in a tent, we would have given up and gone home long ago. ■

## ESSENTIALS

### HIGHLAND CAMPERVANS

A family-owned business based near Inverness that offers a range of modern, heated campervans for hire and sale, including the Mazda Bongo.

[www.highlandcampervans.com](http://www.highlandcampervans.com)

### NATURAL HIGH GUIDING

Guiding company that offers day trips on foot or by bike from its base in Tomich – with easy access to other areas if the wind is blowing. It also organises events such as the 3G and Across Ross mountain bike challenges.

[www.naturalhighguiding.co.uk](http://www.naturalhighguiding.co.uk)

### GLEN AFFRIC

Glen Affric and the wider Strathglass area offers endless opportunities for outdoor adventures.

[www.glenaffric.org](http://www.glenaffric.org)