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Take a scenic 15-mile stroll through Scotland **D4**



OFF DUTY



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ADVENTURE & TRAVEL



To Conquer Scotland, Walk This Way...

The new John Muir Way is an easy, pick-and-choose hiking route through some of the country's most rewarding terrain

ROBBIE LAWRENCE FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL. MAP BY JASON LEE

BY HENRY WISMAYER

ON A SIDEWALK in the old Scottish seaport of Dunbar is a statue of a skinny rag of a boy rough-hewn in bronze. He stands in tattered clothes, right arm raised toward a halo of flying birds.

Most Americans need no introduction to the shaggy-bearded man he would become. This study of youthful freedom is John Muir, pre-eminent naturalist, author and father of America's national parks.

Here in his homeland, however, Mr. Muir remains surprisingly little-known. Until recently there was not much to mark his memory apart from this statue and the small, white, pebble-dashed house across the road, where he was born in 1838 and which today houses the John Muir's Birthplace museum.

Last year, Scotland inaugurated the John Muir Way, a new walking route that traverses the country west-to-east for 134 miles between the Firth of Forth and the Firth of

In the pine forests, the high sun coaxed steam out of the loam.

Clyde. It was conceived both to revere Mr. Muir in the Scottish consciousness and, as environmentalist Keith Geddes, one of the Way's architects, explained, to "help today's young Scots develop a relationship with the countryside around them."

Along with my mum, who, like Mr. Muir, spent her formative years in Scotland, I planned to walk three of the Way's 10 "stages," or sections, over a long weekend.

On the morning we set off from the genteel northern outskirts of Dunbar, a dense fog hung over the town and the only sound was the banshee shriek of seagulls. We skirted the red sandstone escarpment that spills down to the seashore, continuing out onto the craggy stretch of coast where, Mr. Muir wrote, he "grew fond of everything that was wild."

We passed the medieval cliff-top ruins of Dunbar Castle, on whose disintegrating walls the young Mr. Muir learned to climb—a pursuit

that would become a lifelong passion. From there, the route hugged the shoreline, and I couldn't help but imagine Mr. Muir as a boy, skipping over the acres of stratified rock to, as he wrote, "gaze and wonder at the shells and seaweeds, eels and crabs in the pools."

My mum and I are keen ramblers, though perhaps not in the same category as Mr. Muir, who memorably opened his description of a 1,000-mile slog from Kentucky to the Gulf of Mexico with the line: "I only went out for a walk." Fortunately, the Way proved to be about as democratic as a walking trail can be: Weaving through field and village, stitching together many existing footpaths and byways, the Way is varied, easygoing and suitable for most ages and abilities.

The section that we started out on—the most easterly leg—is one of the longer stretches, at around 15 miles. But it wasn't as taxing as it might sound: At the end of the day, as we tramped over fields of wheat stubble and swallows darted from the telephone wires above our heads, we'd hardly taken an uphill stride.

The sense of ease continued the next morning, when we woke up in Edinburgh's elegant Balmoral hotel. One of the most attractive aspects of the trail is the way you can undertake it in pieces. Each leg begins and ends within sight of a railway station, and the town of North Berwick, where the previous day's walk ended, is just a 40-minute train ride to the Scottish capital.

For our second day we chose stage 5: 9 miles through Scotland's old industrial heartland. It was also a trip through time. A 20-minute train ride from Edinburgh took us west to our starting point, Linlithgow, where we wandered the roofless-but-still-stately 16th-century chambers of the town's eponymous palace, once a seat of Scottish royalty.

But the real architectural high point came an hour later, when the trail climbed out of the woods west of Linlithgow and onto a marvel of Georgian engineering: the Avon Aqueduct, which carries the 200-year-old Union Canal high over a series of brick archways above the Avon River.

We followed the canal's flagstone towpath for the rest of the



day, past granite towns that sat dourly beneath gunmetal clouds. Every half-hour or so, squalls of rain blundered in to shatter the reflections on the waterway's otherwise mirror-still surface.

"It never leaves you," sighed mum, plunged into nostalgia by the familiar landscape, and lapsing more often into a long-forgotten Scottish brogue. The moody

weather pursued us all the way to the city of Falkirk.

Late in the day, after we'd dried off and rested in our motel, we visited the Kelpies, a sculpture of two colossal horse heads, 98-foot-high and fabricated from nearly 1,000 stainless-steel plates. They were unveiled last spring as monuments to the Clydesdale nags that heaved canal-barges back when the coun-



HAPPY TRAIL Clockwise from top: A section of the John Muir Way between Balloch and Helensburgh; a horse on the trail near Dunbar; a North Berwick local: Linlithgow, once a seat of Scottish royalty.

try's central lowlands were a soot-smearred caldron.

Scotland was late to adopt the conservation model that Mr. Muir pioneered with Yosemite. It wasn't until 2002 that Loch Lomond and the Trossachs (a glen) became the country's first national park. We saw it the next morning, after a 90-minute train ride to Balloch, as we began our last day on the Way. Loch Lomond might have been designated as a park only recently, but it's long been a favorite escape for the locals. Over a cup of tea at Loch Lomond Shores, a new development of shops and cafes along a tree-lined curve of the loch's southernmost rim, mum recalled how she used to come here with her parents as a child in the 1950s for a bucolic respite from the Ayrshire suburbs of Glasgow.

Lomond was our starting point for a memorable day of hiking beneath clear skies. The route wound through pine forests, where the high sun coaxed steam out of the loam, and on to the moorland beyond, swathed in that distinctive highland texture of gorse, fern and heather. It was the most beautiful and archetypally Scottish landscape we would encounter in our three days.

Throughout the afternoon we rarely saw another walker. And if we looked in the right direction at the right moment even here, 30 miles from Glasgow, we could glimpse the pre-human innocence Mr. Muir coveted, away from what he called the "tyranny of man."

Perhaps, I thought, as we rolled down toward the Way's end in coastal Helensburgh, the intrepid nature-lover, who described himself as "hopelessly and forever a mountaineer," might have selected a trickier route through these hills.

But accessibility is what the Way is all about: coaxing people to dust off their boots, pack a bag and set out to explore the many colors of Scotland's coastline and countryside. And that is no doubt a mission that Mr. Muir would have commended.

THE LOWDOWN // HIKING SCOTLAND'S JOHN MUIR WAY

Getting there: Lufthansa and United fly from New Jersey's Newark airport to Edinburgh. Scotrail (scotrail.co.uk) offers regular and reliable train service



from Edinburgh Waverley station to the start and end points of every stage of the John Muir Way. Those planning to take a lot of trains, or who want to travel further afield, should consider buying a "Freedom of Scotland Travelpass," which allows unlimited travel throughout the country over a set period (from about \$210 for four days).

Hiking there: The John Muir Way is open throughout the year and is divided into 10 stages of roughly equal length from Helensburgh in the west to Dunbar in the east. Its excellent

website provides detailed information on everything from points of interest to the life of John Muir himself (johnmuirway.org).

Staying there: Check the website for a comprehensive list of recommended accommodations, from homey B&Bs to grand country estates (johnmuirway.org/accommodation). For a luxurious interlude, it's hard to beat Edinburgh's Balmoral Hotel, right next door to Waverley station (from about \$440 a night; roccofothelots.com). In Glasgow, citizenM is just around the corner from Glasgow Queen Street Station.

Rooms are small but comfortable and packed with modern touches (from about \$105 a night; citizenm.com).

What to take: While hiking the trail, you're rarely more than an hour's walk away from a place to get food and drink, so you needn't carry more than water and snacks. This being Scotland, waterproof clothing and decent walking shoes are advisable. If you don't want to carry your luggage with you, the John Muir Way Baggage Service can transport it for you from \$20 per bag per stage (johnmuirwaybaggageservice.co.uk).