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The Far Country: a Loch Maree - Fionn Loch - Lochan Fada circuit

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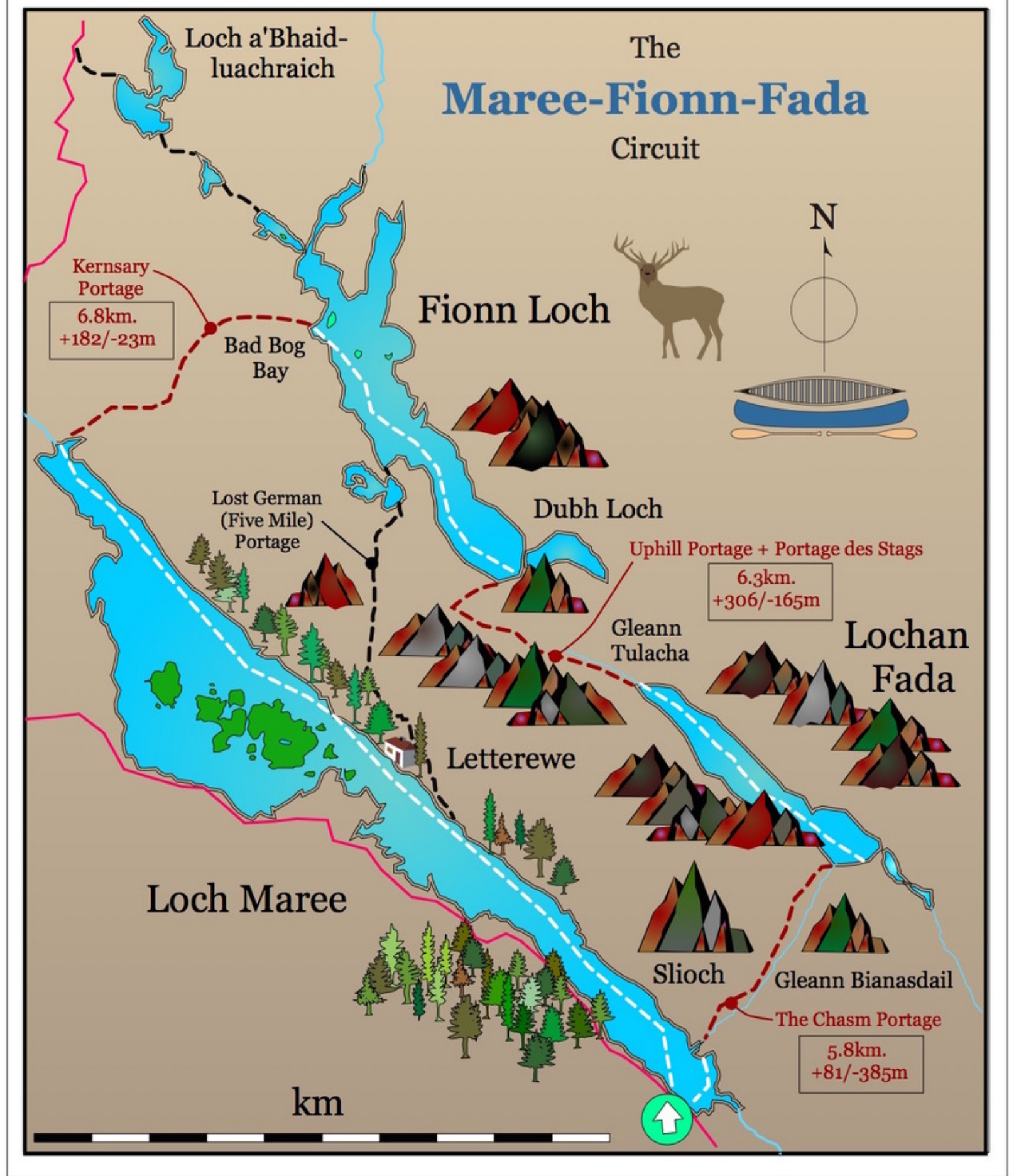
3rd-November-2015, 11:45 AM

#1

Moosehead
Established member

Join Date: Mar 2007
Posts: 94

[The Far Country: a Loch Maree - Fionn Loch - Lochan Fada circuit](#)



Fada: adj. *Long, far*

This was our fourth attempt at this route. As a concept, a circuit of these three handsome lochs jumps out at you from the comfortable two dimensions of the map, but enthusiasm cools a little when you work out the distances and elevations involved. Still, Lochan Fada looks enticingly remote, and being sandwiched between the great rock walls of Beinn Lair and Beinn Tharsuinn Chaol, might have an atmosphere unlike anything we have paddled before. In fact, to us it was irresistible; a wild, deep, water-filled slice through the mountains.

Three years ago we portaged in to Fionn Loch from Loch a' Bhaid-luachraich, only to be sobered up by the wall of rock between us and Lochan Fada ([see here](#)). We took an escape portage over the hills to Letterewe (The Lost German Portage). It is perhaps a good job that we didn't get any further on that attempt because we might have got ourselves stuck in a place with no easy way to extricate the canoes if our portaging skills had faltered.

The route has had a subliminal pull on us ever since. Fada translates from the Gaelic to "long" or "far", but the latter seems to sum up this loch best, given the climb needed to get to it, so The Far Loch it became. This climb wasn't the only obstacle though, there was the little matter of the portage route out again, down the great Chasm of Gleann Bianasdail, which Mike, one of the members on our original attempt, had rather theatrically christened The Jaws of Death.

Last October, a proposed return to the route was curtailed by ex-hurricane Gonzalo, and last May, again, forecast high winds caused us to slink off to the shelter of Galloway Forest. We didn't even want to think about fifty-mile-an-hour winds up at The Far Loch. Loch Maree also has a reputation for suffering winds badly.



At last; perfect starting-out conditions on Loch Maree

The jumping off point this time was again the free Beinn Eighe campsite. The Allt na Still waterfall opposite, so dramatic on previous occasions, had for the moment

been turned off. Would low water levels affect us up in the Far Country? We were buzzing with excitement; back at long last with a decent weather outlook and a lot of miles under the portage boots since our first abortive attempt. The prospect of the next few days was one of adventure, something of a step into the unknown, an endeavour the outcome of which was definitely in doubt. This seemed a route where you had to commit fairly fully to your ability to overcome whatever the landscape might throw at you.



Loch Maree



Lunch stop on the beach opposite Isle Maree; drying out after an intense condensation night

We set off from the top end of Loch Maree in the sunshine and just a slight breeze. The mountains looked fabulous; even the view up the dreaded Chasm looked quite friendly from this angle. An otter playing in the sparkling water dived lazily when it saw us. The only cloud on the horizon was a not-so-slow accumulation of water inside the Peterborough as we paddled. Graham's overhaul of the canoe in preparation for the trip had followed his usual routine — a blur of arms and legs and duct tape. Had his love affair with this material blinded him to its faults? When we stopped for lunch at the beach opposite Isle Maree, a spot we knew well from our last trip here, we re-taped some of the repairs to the hull, however this did not seal the leak completely. Graham established a kind of reverse Plimsoll Line on the inside of the canoe so we could tell when it was really advisable to stop and empty out. Perhaps, after twenty-two years, it's time to give the old friend a new canvas.



The calm conditions of the morning gave way to a breezy afternoon and quite serious waves. Our passage down Loch Maree reached an exciting climax with a combination of high seas, an un-landable shore and water lapping way above the Plimsoll Line (Graham didn't burden Andrew with this last piece of information), and it was with some relief that we turned into the calm of the bay at Inveran.

The first portage is along the track past Kernsary farmstead to the little harbour on Fionn Loch. The track surface is good, the gradient gentle and the carry straightforward. We camped behind a little quarry partway along. During packing, Graham had realised that the drab colour of the GoPro case was a bad idea; note to self: tag with orange flagging tape so it is more visible. In the last minute rush, Graham forgot to do this. Result: the camera gets left behind at the start of the portage, which now required an extra couple of miles for its retrieval. This wouldn't have happened to Andrew, who packs with mathematical precision.

It was a beautiful starry night with the Milky Way arcing overhead. Andrew held a class in astronomy, teaching Graham some new constellations. Graham experimented with some new names; The Canoe Baler, The Tarp, Orion's Paddle Rack. We saw several satellites purposefully tracking overhead; a strange link between our remote location and the high-tech world outside.

Bad Bog Bay

Next morning we continued on with the packs and had breakfast next to a river for our water supply. After passing the farm we said goodbye to the trees, the last we would see for three days (except for a few on the Fionn islands). The track continued easily to the last outpost of civilization at the well-maintained little harbour at the wonderfully named Bad Bog Bay. Last time we paddled on Fionn

Loch we were fighting the wind and waves — it's exposed up here; even the fishing boats are protected by a harbour wall — and now we anxiously scanned the surface for whitecaps when the loch first came into view.



A very civilised harbour on a very wild loch: Bag Bog Bay

Our apprehension was not helped by walkers we passed yesterday saying that the loch was “rough”. Today, however, it looked benign, the waters calming towards the great uplift of crags which was giving shelter from the southerly. Geologically, Fionn Loch is known for its glacial erratic boulders. Great blocks of stone have rained down on the land, here, there and everywhere. In one renowned spot, a low hill sports so many boulders it looks like it is home to a flock of sheep. The blocks were to make very good landmarks for the portage trail later on, but can some times be un-nerving; occasionally one poised on the horizon looks like a person spying on you, giving you a start whenever it catches your eye. The blocks are not just scattered on the land, but under the water too. A sharp look-out is needed on the fringes of the loch.



Setting out from the boulder-strewn landscape onto Fionn Loch, keeping a good eye out for submerged rocks



Fionn Loch

Once beyond the loch's submerged teeth, Fionn gave pleasant paddling in an increasingly wild situation once past the islands. The massive slabs of Creag an Dubh Loch grew in size, giving an expanding perspective on the portage ahead. We had scanned Google Earth in search of friendly beaches. We knew there was one at either end of Lochan Fada, and one at the end of Fionn Loch, to which we

now headed. After a bit of exploring we found a good camping spot on a terrace behind the shingle, right next to the path which was to be the first part of our portage trail. A couple of hill walkers heavily wrapped up against the worsening conditions appeared out of nowhere, stopped by our tents for a chat, then dematerialised into the cloud.

The shelter provided by the rock wall, although most welcome from a paddling point of view, had a darker aspect - it was attracting the end-of-season midges. They had congregated in the still cushion of air beneath the cliff and now plagued us while we cooked our meal. On with the Smidge and headnets. We have been coming to Scotland in October for several years and never had any problem at all with midges. Clearly, we had been lucky.



The camp below the cliffs at the top of Fionn Loch. The duct tape repairs seems to be holding! Lochan Fada is above and to the right of the rock wall



Paddles designed to lock behind the carrying thwarts allow a convenient free-standing ridge line to be set up for the tarp

Portaging into the next dimension

There was an air of anticipation that night; the real adventure was about to begin. Ahead was a portage of the same stature, in terms of elevation, as some famous historic portages such as the Methye in northwestern Saskatchewan, or the Big Hill (Grand Falls) portage in Labrador. It started raining and we awoke to a misty, wet morning, the now seemingly gigantic cliffs rearing up above us, disappearing into the clouds.

We had built a reasonable experience of handling portage distance, now we turned our attention to the third dimension — up! We intended to split the portage to Lochan Fada into two legs, subsequently named Uphill Portage and Portage des Stags, separated by a lunch stop at more-or-less the highest point, close to one thousand feet above our heads.

We hadn't walked any of the proposed portage routes previously; prior knowledge would have spoiled the adventure, although carrying into unknown ravines could lead you into some very sticky situations. Our imaginations had seen us clinging to the rocks, straddling the void, trying to manoeuvre the canoe and heavy packs.

Because the portages were quite long, we had thought about using the two-trip system to cut down the mileage, but because this is better suited to known routes, and as we anticipated a bit of hunting around for the best way through, we decided to stick with the standard three trip, packs-return-canoe, system. This is classic carrying country; you cannot drag here; you have to portage. We implemented Remote Portage Rules: have first aid kit and storm shelter (and now midge nets) with you at all times. We worried that the midges would discover the

still, appetising air in our upturned canoe and plague us on the carry, but happily this didn't happen.

The Uphill Portage followed a path on the map which suddenly ended as it turned east into Gleann Tulacha, (Valley of the Hillocks). We knew this meant that the terrain changed at this point to one that didn't focus walkers into one particular track. This could be good, or this could be bad. The first section of the portage progressed steadily and we developed an effective technique for dealing with the steep rocky bits with the canoe overhead. It was still raining lightly by the time we stopped for lunch in a little stream gully, so we rigged the tarp over the canoe for shelter. Quite a wild spot! Our portage escape route of last time takes a much lower way through the mountains to the west, and now looked positively friendly.



ON THE HIGH PORTAGE. THE STEEPER PART IS BELOW

A motivational picture Graham circulated to the team before a previous attempt on the Maree-Fionn-Fada route. The photo (taken in Labrador in 1904) turned out to be uncannily similar to Uphill Portage



Lunch time in the rain at the top of Uphill Portage

Bad Night at Slanting Rock

From the lunch spot, the narrow path continued rising across the steep, open slope below the crags of Beinn Lair, with plenty of space beneath your feet, then at last started descending into Gleann Tulacha. The atmosphere of this place was immediately different. If you go into the mountains and don't see any deer, it's because they are all here, gathered in what seems like their spiritual home. The stags were in the full rush of bellowing, but this wasn't bellowing as we had heard before, it echoed off the vast walls of rock around us, giving an extraordinary quality to the sound, and the place a feel like no other. We came to the end of the path then took the most promising line towards Lochan Fada, still out of view at this point. At around 4pm we chose a campsite next to a prominent boulder (Slanting Rock) and went back for the boat. We felt a long way from home. The valley certainly was a glacial dumping ground, a chaos of mounds and blocks. The dramatic physical landscape was overlaid by an intense psychological one, coloured by the effort of getting here with all the gear, and by the foreshadow of perhaps the even greater effort of getting out again.



Looking back to the lunchstop from the first part of Portage des Stags. The canoe is in the same spot as in the previous picture. The path of Uphill Portage can be seen clinging to the hillside sloping down rightwards



The camp at Slanting Rock, partway down Gleann Tulacha

The bellowing continued all night, keeping us awake. Lying there in the dark, the sounds evoked a dream landscape in which each hillock had a stag silhouetted on top, the Valley of the Mountain Kings. Some stags had very distinctive bellows and by dawn we felt we had come to know some individuals quite well. Our favourite was Tommy Cooper, who always ended his utterances with a crusty laugh “Ha-Ha-Ha-Ha”.



Slanting Rock camp at dawn. Full-on wild

The way down to the loch was a complex route through the hillocks and blocks, aided by some prominent landmark boulders (Shelter Rock, The Cube, River Block) courtesy of various Ice Age goings-on. At one point we crossed a dry gravel stream bed that would make a considerable obstacle if in spate. It seems the dry conditions were in our favour. In its lower reaches, the main valley stream turns from straight to serpentine on the map which usually means its flow becomes slow and deep (like Allt na Braclaich running into Cam Loch) and allows passage in the canoe, but here this law didn't hold, and we had to carry the entire distance to the Loch. The Google Earth beach was waiting for us and gave a perfect lunch spot with a ring-side view of the loch we had come so far to paddle. The loch looked big, the water stretched for miles; there's no way this is a lochan! Of all places, we had really not wanted to meet a strong wind here; we could only imagine what the funnelling effect of the deep valley would do to the wind and waves. But we were in luck, it was relatively calm, and our passage along the loch was easy—and spectacular in its remoteness and by being the culmination of so much anticipation. We tried to capture the moment: we are here, now; this is it!



Portage des Stags, Slanting Rock in the background



Lochan Fada, “a wild, deep, water-filled slice through the mountains”

We searched for the best camping spot on the beach terrace at the far end of the

loch. Graham's eyes lit up when he found a patch of his favourite sleeping surface — pea gravel. Mindful of the midges at Fionn Loch, we pitched our rain tarp parallel to the breeze for a wind tunnel effect, so as not to create a midge haven of still air.

Later we skimmed over to take a look at the first part of the portage out, which should have been downhill but was unfortunately uphill again. Then we wandered over to say hello to the occupant, a lone German walker, of a little orange tent we could see in the distance. We also cast an eye over the lochs leading eastwards from Lochan Fada and the prospect for onward travel.



Our first view of The Chasm from the outflow of Lochan Fada

Into the Chasm

In the morning, after a short paddle to where the exit river begins its thousand-foot plunge down Gleann Bianasdail to Loch Maree, we had breakfast and organized the packs for the carry. The final portage (Chasm Portage) begins with a steady uphill climb for another 2-300ft before starting to descend. Just before the highpoint, we passed a hidden wooded valley, a lush Shangri-La of trees after the bare hills of the last three days, a delight to our tree-starved eyes. Once again, our imaginations had gone into overdrive in advance of this section. We had envisaged crumbly paths barely clinging to steep slopes, impossible drop-offs, boulder-choked ravines carrying swollen mountain streams. Not wanting to spoil the adventure for others, we'll just say that the path was indeed airy in places,

where care was needed placing every single step; we didn't want to roll down the 300ft to the river below.



About to enter The Chasm

Near the bottom of the valley, something geological has happened and the river has burst out of the old chasm and cut a new one. This closes up into a tight rocky gorge near its lower end. Here our path clung to the very brink of the drop, directly above the thundering water and ran over some tricky sloping slabs and rocky steps. This was one-slip-and-you're-dead country, bad enough with the packs, and a total nightmare prospect for carrying the canoe. We had a bit of a scout around on the way back up, and by a combination of intuition and a bit of luck, managed to piece together a fairly clear and safe alternative. Finding it again with our heads under the canoe was another matter, however.



Our portage route climbs away from the dangerous gorge-side path near the bottom of Gleann Bianasdail

Graham was now experiencing some pain from bruised shoulders when carrying the canoe. He should have padded up better, even though carrying the boat was perfectly comfortable for several miles; any slight rubbing or pressure gets amplified by distance, and once the damage is done, further padding has much less effect. You keep learning, don't you.

The Perfect End

Some benign force had created the perfect campsite adjacent to the bridge that marks the end of the Chasm Portage. For no apparent reason there was a flat rectangle of short grass right in the midst of a tangled bracken thicket. We gratefully adopted this as home for the night. It felt very welcoming; the tension of the trip was over and we could see the comforting glow of the fire of another canoe party camped up on the beach about half a mile away. The Chasm still

ruled the place however; the deeply powerful sound of the river was a constant companion throughout the night.



A welcome camping place at the end of Chasm Portage



Oh no! no more portaging....

The next day was to be a rest day and dawned fine for us. We walked up Slioch and on along the ridge to get a good arial view of Lochan Fada. It was gloriously relaxing in the sunshine.

The final day again dawned fair. The sunlight intensified the blues of the water and greens of the trees; the vibrant colours seemed so striking after our eyes had become accustomed to the drab colours of The Far Country. The final paddle was an utter delight on the calm water of Maree, possibly the most beautiful of lochs. We stopped to chat to the other party camped on the shingle, before swinging the canoe round to head for the beach opposite and the car. We didn't want the paddle to end, but at last the grating of the canoe on the gravel beach signalled the completion of the circuit.



Back on Loch Maree; completing the circle

Following tradition, we pointed the car towards the Inverness Bay Trading Post (Tesco's) intent on gorging ourselves back into civilisation on pies and cakes.

This is a spectacular trip. We have purposefully not described the route or terrain in too much detail because dealing with the route for yourself, unseen and unknown, is the very essence of trips such as these. Completing the route adds some confidence to the ambition of attempting bigger things, further afield.

Andrew(Borgwitha)
Graham (Moosehead)

Graham

[Moosehead Canoes and Paddles](#)

www.scottishcanoeroutes.info



Reply

Reply With Quote





tim ◦
Way beyond established member

Location: Just a little to the right of the Shire
Posts: 2,314



A fantastic bloggage of a grand adventure, thanks for posting.

Cheers
Tim



Paddles a Prospector



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3rd-November-2015, 12:21 PM

#3



Davy 90 ◦
Way beyond established member

Join Date: Aug 2011
Location: SE London
Posts: 3,473



Superb! I downed tools and made lunch early to enjoy this properly.

3 photos of the canoe on the water

Brilliant write up, fantastic trip.

Where next?

[my canoe movies](#)



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3rd-November-2015, 12:28 PM

#4



David Perry ◦
Way beyond established member

Join Date: Jul 2007
Location: Robin Hood's Bay, Yorkshire
Posts: 2,534



A fine blogg.

I thought some of the portages I've done in Canada were bad but the Chasm looks?????? err knackered!

<http://www.davidwperry.blogspot.co.uk/>



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3rd-November-2015, 12:58 PM

#5



[broadsman](#) o
More than established member

Join Date: Jan 2010
Location: Claxton
Posts: 358



Fantastic!

The early bird may catch the worm... but the second mouse gets the cheese!



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3rd-November-2015, 01:28 PM

#6

[andycarden](#) o
More than established member

Join Date: Dec 2005
Location: Newcastle,
County Down
Posts: 348



Beautifully produced blog of an amazing adventure. Stunning!

"Thus we lead a life of pleasure
Thus we while the hours away"

from Thoreau, Voyager's Song



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3rd-November-2015, 01:49 PM

#7

Join Date: Apr 2011
Location: SW France
Posts: 2,244



MarkL ◦
Trying my best



Great trip and blog thereof.
There seems to be a lot of this habit of "taking a canoe for a walk" around here. Odd that. This one is clearly one of the tougher "walks" I've seen and is an impressive undertaking.

Originally Posted by **Davy 90**

Superb! I downed tools and made lunch early to enjoy this properly.

doesn't take much though does it ?

Cheers

MarkL

*and I am here ...
and you are there ...
and a thousand miles between.*



Reply | Reply With Quote | +

3rd-November-2015, 02:02 PM

#8



Matto ◦
Moderately Moderate Moderator

Join Date: Dec 2005
Location: Nr Rochester in Kent
Posts: 3,701



Brilliant.

Matto

Ours was the marsh country, down by the river, within, as the river wound, twenty miles of the sea.



3rd-November-2015, 02:32 PM

#9



Mal Grey
Way beyond established member

Join Date: Jul 2008
Location: Surrey
Posts: 18,476



Utterly stupendous. Raising the tough portage bar to world record levels, I think.

I actually spent time looking at the various portage routes into Lochan Fada. I'd decided that they were all stupid, but maybe a walk up there after paddling Fionn Loch would be reasonable, as its one of the wildest places in Britain that I want to visit. I'm obviously a wimp! I've never heard of anybody else paddling canoes on Lochan Fada, though I expect its been Packrafted by now.

Inspirational, as always.

Covering as many malmiles as possible before being distracted by the pub! 🍷🔥



Paddle Points - where to paddle

3rd-November-2015, 06:27 PM

#10



mayobren
Way beyond established member

Join Date: Jul 2012
Location: Nottingham
Posts: 3,557

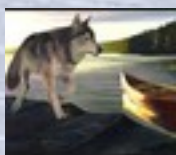


Inspirational!

All that is necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing.

3rd-November-2015, 07:28 PM

#11



Snow Wolf
Quiet member

Join Date: Jul 2015
Location: N.Ireland
Posts: 14



Absolutely Amazing and riveting read !!

Snow Wolf 🐺



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3rd-November-2015, 07:32 PM

#12



Join Date: Jul 2008
Location: Kettering
Northamptonshire
Posts: 706

Patterdale Paddler ◦
More posts than a more established member



Fantastic - I paddled Fionn Loch and climbed 'The Maiden' in 2009 - a magical place. Today's guilty pleasure was sitting doing nothing & reading about your hard work. Well done!

A ship should not ride on a single anchor, nor life on a single hope - Epictetus



Reply | Reply With Quote | +

3rd-November-2015, 07:54 PM

#13



elveys ◦
Way beyond established member

Join Date: Feb 2007
Location: Yalding, Kent
Posts: 2,496



Superb adventure and very inspirational.



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3rd-November-2015, 08:00 PM

#14

terry. young ◦
Beyond established member

Join Date: Apr 2008
Location: northamptonshire
Posts: 1,127



Excellent Hard core adventure, brilliant, [as always.] 👍👍👍



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3rd-November-2015, 08:15 PM

#15



Join Date: May 2010
Location: Lancashire North Of The Sands
Posts: 707

Ninja Pirate ◦
More posts than a more established member



You're both absolutely bonkers and I am so glad you shared your bonkersness on here.

Brilliant bloggage, as always, enjoyed every minute of it! 🤪

There's a [Bluebird](#) in my heart



Reply | Reply With Quote | +

3rd-November-2015, 11:13 PM

#16



flat cap Andy ◦
More than established member

Join Date: Apr 2012
Location: Sauf West London
Posts: 266



So I am I correct in thinking you portaged for 57 km with the pack-return-canoe system? I get excited if I manage to get my canoe onto the car roof without physical injury! Fantastic effort, great canoe and I hope my canvas lasts 22 years.

'...you can led a horse to water but a pencil must be lead...' *Stan Laurel*



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4th-November-2015, 07:09 AM

#17



rbm109 ◦
Pipe dreamer.....

Join Date: Jan 2013
Location: Cumbria, UK
Posts: 591



What brave, brave people (is brave the right word?); I don't think I'd even have looked seriously at the map, never mind done it.

And it's great to see a "real" canoe being used for such a journey. Anything that you can fix in the wilderness with nothin more than duct tape can't be bad in my book.



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4th-November-2015, 07:15 AM

#18



Digger ◦
More posts than a more established member

Join Date: Jul 2008
Location: Netherlands
Posts: 716



Originally Posted by **Moosehead**

Fada: adj. Long, far

...
Fada translates from the Gaellic to "long" or "far", but the latter seems to sum up this loch best, given the climb needed to get to it, so The Far Loch it became.

In Marseille if someone tells you you are "fada" they mean to say yhat you should visit a doctor to have your head examined.

"Eh oh! T'est fada, ou quoi?"

"Fada" is definitely the word for such an endeavour. 😊



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4th-November-2015, 10:29 AM

#19



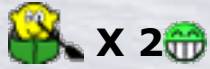
tenboats1 ◦
Way beyond established member

Join Date: Dec 2005
Location: between Kinross and Alloa, Scotland
Posts: 2,472



Done back in the mid 1980's but we didn't blogg in those days.....but still a good effort at any period in history!

If it wasn't for the rain in our lives there would be no rivers.



X 2



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5th-November-2015, 12:34 AM

#20

Gordon G

More than established member

Join Date: Jan 2014

Location: S. Yorkshire

Posts: 410



Brilliant blogg. I have spent hours looking at this route on maps and Google Earth, but like Mal have always been put off by the portages. Hats off to you!

Gordon

www.aphotographerfloat.co.uk

www.northpeakphotography.co.uk



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Reply With Quote



5th-March-2016, 10:29 AM

#21



scoutmaster

More than established member

Join Date: Mar 2006

Location: Forres, Moray, Scotland

Posts: 392



You guys have certainly excelled yourselves with this one, and you definitely get to sew-on your expedition badges for such an achievement.

I'm not one for shying-away from an arduous portage, but 'The Chasm Portage' and the 'Uphill Portage' are ones I wouldn't consider taking on lightly.

Thanks for the blog and the excellent photos

Fred



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14th-March-2016, 01:20 PM

#22



Join Date: Apr 2007

Location: The rainy side of the Lakes.

Posts: 823

The Cumbrian. ◦

More posts than a more established member



Fantastic.

Cheers, Michael.

Brute Force and Ignorance is Vastly Underrated.

"There is magic in the feel of a paddle and the movement of a canoe, a magic compounded of distance, adventure, solitude, and peace."

-Sigurd Olson



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15th-March-2016, 07:17 PM

#23

Matkat ◦

More than established member

Join Date: Jun 2007
Location: Crowle Green.
Worcestershire
Posts: 351



That has to be the absolute top of the top 10 blogs, absolutely brilliant..... Well done
◆◆◆◆◆◆◆◆

To travel alone is a risky business, especially in the wilderness; equally risky is to have dreams and not follow them.



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