

Recently started a new job or new degree at St Andrews? Thought about taking up hillwalking?

Some online resources.

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I moved to Scotland in 2002, from England. One of the perks that come with a job at the University of St Andrews is easy access to one of the great wildernesses of Europe. But my teenage years in Switzerland had meant endless school trips in the Alps. They seemed tedious at the time, and it took me a while to discover the charms of walking in the Scottish Highlands and in Fife. I started exploring the hills more systematically in 2003; by then I had realised how lucky I was to be near such a wild environment which contrasted in interesting ways with the small-town safety of St Andrews.

Hillwalking in Scotland may differ from walking environments elsewhere. Your geographical isolation often seems more extreme here. There may be no mobile phone reception for all or parts of your walk; you may see no roads and no human habitation. On many hills, there are no paths either. Dairy farming does not reach as far up in Scotland as it does in the Alps, and Scottish sheep can be found a long way from their home farm. You may not encounter another human soul during an entire day of walking. There is remarkably little signposting once you are on a Scottish hill, in comparison with what you might get in the Alps, for example, where you can find your bearings more easily even if you're new to the area. In Scotland, navigation is largely your own responsibility, on the day. The physical challenges seem different too. The Scottish hills can be an obstacle race of fences, stiles, knee-deep heather, knee-deep mud, peat hags, boggy swamps, loose scree and boulder fields, all of which can slow you down. I've made my way through a lot more streams and burns here than in any other country, and the wind seems more constant than elsewhere. Given all the hardship and suffering involved, it can be difficult to explain what the attraction is, of exposing yourself to all this!

There is the physical exercise and exposure to fresh air in your outdoor gym for the day—in pandemic times you will appreciate those even more. As you reach the summit of a hill, the sheer physical tiredness and elation will make you feel good. But the views on the way up and especially the views from the top also contribute to your self-awareness. Psychologists speak of 'awe', I think: an intense positive emotion that floods your mind as you find yourself in the presence of something vast or overwhelming, with a sense of your own smallness. As you move through a Scottish hillscape, crawling up the side of a mountain, you appreciate how *far* you can see, in what is typically a treeless environment. It's also a landscape where you need to take a lot of decisions as you pick your way across difficult terrain; you live in the moment, for hours. The decision-taking and problem-solving is often linked to navigation and your choice of route, in a strangely honest environment, where good planning gets rewarded, and bad decisions get punished straightaway, and vanity too. In that sense, hillwalking seems

to be a good mix of physical and mental exercise, and can be quite addictive, once you get used to it. You remember your walks, and details from them, long after the walks are over. You realise how much of our university lives involves indoor work, and you want to get some wind in your hair again.

There are now much better online hillwalking resources than when I first started off. Maybe you prefer to walk with friends or family, but if you're looking for new company, there are various options. There's [Breakaway: the University of St Andrews Hillwalking Club](#), a friendly and highly active society for both students and staff of all ages and levels of experience; they offer guided walks all year round, plus social activities and technical advice. You may also have heard of the [Ramblers Association](#), a national walking charity, with local groups one can join. More focused on walking as part of your daily life is the university's [Step Count Challenge](#) which encourages team-based competitive walking as part of the current Wellbeing initiative.

For planning, the most useful tool has to be the excellent [Walkhighlands](#) website portal, set up in 2006 by Helen and Paul Webster, which provides information and social networks for walkers, free of charge. The portal contains detailed walk descriptions, with maps, for some 2000 walking routes (also covering the Lowlands, including Fife, despite its name). Walks are graded according to difficulty (terrain, distance, ascent), and there's something for everyone: from easy woodland and urban routes to more ambitious tours covering the 282 [Munros](#), the 222 [Corbetts](#), the 219 [Grahams](#), or the 573 [Marilyns](#) of Scotland. That's a lot of options for time spent outdoors! The portal also contains a handy interactive map for keeping track of what you have climbed.

The Walkhighlands portal also advises on some long-distance routes (such as the [West Highlands Way](#), the [Fife Coastal Path](#)) and some non-Scottish walks. For your chosen walks, you can look up [reports](#) on specific routes written by other walkers; there are also friendly [discussion forums](#); these can help you deal with questions and problems, including problematic terrain. Forum discussions and feature articles have recently also focused on general wellbeing matters, such as physical and mental health problems that hillwalking can help with, and inclusivity and ethnic diversity among hillwalkers. Particularly helpful are also the [gear reviews](#), and — my favourite — information on the (usually Gaelic) names of mountains, with handy [sound files](#).

The portal's [wildlife sightings](#) forum will help you appreciate your walking environment from a different angle. No Scottish wildlife will pose a danger to you, unlike in other countries. Deer, grouse, ptarmigan, and mountain hares will probably be the most common animals you'll meet. But there's also [the UK's only reindeer herd](#) which roams freely around the Cairngorms, and I have also come across salmon making their way upstream, circling eagles and ospreys, some adders and an otter, very cute plover chicks, and a male snow bunting which had based itself in the Braeriach plateau area back in 2015; it had worked out that when walkers reach a summit, the sandwiches come out. 2021 was the best ever year for Scottish cuckoos; I've never heard so many. (The winner of the Glen Tulla cuckoo call contest was still audible at 900m altitude! There was no female cuckoo there to hear him, though).

To deal with some other wildlife in Scotland, look for a chemical defence, and on this too online discussion forums can advise: there are the famous Scottish [midges](#), [clegs](#) (horseflies) and [keds](#) (deer flies), of which the last are by far *the worst*. Before modern insect repellents, conditions must have been hellish in the Scottish hills. A visit to the excellent [Highland Folk Museum](#) and the [Scottish Crannog Centre](#) will demonstrate the typical build of medieval and prehistoric dwellings: nearly windowless, dark, smoke-filled spaces. Much of the Highlands can only have been sparsely populated for much of human history.

Above all, stay safe when you go hillwalking: inform yourself about the weather via the [Mountain Weather Information Service](#); dress both for the forecast conditions *and* for contingencies, with wet weather gear and emergency equipment. If inexperienced, avoid walking solo. Generally, let someone know where you're going and what your timetable is. Don't be overreliant on electronic devices. You will need to factor in delays and changes of plans.

[Winter walking in the Scottish hills](#) really requires some experience, or prior attendance of training courses offered, for example, the organisations already mentioned; the [Steven Fallon hillwalking portal](#) also offers training courses. Winter daylight hours are even shorter in the Scottish hills than elsewhere, and hillwalking tragedies tend to occur in the colder months.

In other ways, though, walking in Scotland seems safer than in some other places: for me as a female who also walks solo, my encounters with other walkers in remote spots have invariably been friendly and interesting. I remember many good conversations with farmers, landowners, gamekeepers, ghillies, and other locals, who are often as concerned about your welfare as that of their livestock or game. In the foothills of Meall Ghaordaidh, the Duncroisk farmer offered me a lift in his land rover when he realised I was heading towards a cow with a newborn calf, surrounded by a protective herd. Or the time at the Beinn Bhuidhe bad step, when I dropped a walking pole near the abyss and decided not to risk my life to retrieve it, only to have a gentlemanly walker passing it to me 20 minutes later when he had caught up with me. Information about weather, wildlife and updates about possible routes is often shared with strangers in the Scottish hills. Walking in that environment really can bring out the best in people.

Other pursuits can easily be added in to hillwalking, and not just physical ones, like going for a swim in a freezing loch during the summer, or mountain biking to the foot of a hill before a climb. During the winter months, reading about hillwalking goes well with the actual thing, for example in terms of historical background: [Andrew Dempster's *The Munros: A History \(2021\)*](#) will be a stocking filler for many walkers this Christmas. For prose, there is the cult read [Nan Shepherd, *The Living Mountain*](#), written in the 1940s but first published in 1977. For poetry, Garry MacKenzie's recent, superb [Ben Dorain: *A Conversation with a Mountain \(2020\)*](#) is full of lines that will be on your mind the next time you're in physical conversation with a hill. There is no lack of historical reference in Scotland's hills, for an extra dimension to planning your next adventure, from the [Rob Roy Way](#) linking sites relating to the famous Scottish outlaw, to the remains of numerous tragic plane crashes scattered across mountainsides, to the Victoriana of [Royal Deeside's](#) Victorian Heritage Trail. A visit to Queen Victoria's picnic site at the famous [Glen Esk Queen's Well](#) shows that the benefits of Scottish

outdoor excursions have been known about for a long time. For the St Andrews area, the [Huw Cullan](#) murder mysteries provide interesting reminders of what moving through rural Fife on foot or horseback must have been like, in earlier times. Outdoor walking slows modern people down to much older speeds.

If winter conditions, bad weather or your lack of time prevent more adventurous tours, the Lowlands and Fife can provide excellent practice: a climb up [Largo Law](#) will yield fabulous views over the Firth of Forth on a clear day, reminding you that Fife is not Edinburgh. The St Andrews and East Neuk sections of the [Fife Coastal Path](#) (never far from the bus route, in case you need to bail out) involve more climbs than you think and will get you fit for another summer season of walks in the Highlands. To experience the power of water and its effect on your wellbeing, try the [Munlochy Cloutie Well](#) in the Black Isle, plus any number of Scottish distilleries, or a visit to the [Falls of Bruar](#) (foodies will also appreciate the delicatessen in the nearby tourist centre). Finally, in St Andrews, a climb up [St Rule's Tower](#) can put university life into perspective: the positive effects which walking and climbing have on your wellbeing have much to do with looking at your surroundings from a new angle.