

GREAT GLEN WAY on Horseback



The GGW is easily accessible to horse riders and the way well marked and for the most part easy to ride (as far as we went!).

If you are an experienced trail/endurance/TREC rider then you and your horse should be well prepared and find it enjoyable and straightforward provided you do a little prior planning and preparation. If not, do not despair but be aware of your limitations and those of your horse.

Both horse and rider should be experienced and competent. You should be able to cope with a horse that shies and comfortable at walk, trot and canter. You and your horse should be at home in all types of terrain as there are some steep and narrow footpaths in the later stages which go through some quite dense forestry. Exposed roots along some sections also present a serious trip hazard if trying to canter or trot.

Your horse may be 'bombproof' in your local environment but it is unlikely it will have ever have had a large pleasure cruiser spitting water and revving engines tying up beside it as you pass a lock side with rushing water and various other distractions such as rattling yacht rigging wires, flag and sails etc. Also be prepared for the sudden noise of low-flying military jets - they come low and fast with no warning and if your horse has never encountered it before will almost certainly be unhappy (this can cause serious problems in denser forestry where the horses cannot see what is making the noise.) Some of the forestry sections may also have harvesting work ongoing so be prepared to meet lorries, vans and some other strange machinery on the forest tracks. The foresters are country people though and generally will try and make things easy for you if they can.

Some of the roads and tracks have wooden or metal bridge sections. Some parts in particular have a roughened metal surface over the decking for grip and it sounds like walking over a biscuit tin. Such sudden changes in surface may be better dealt with by dismounting if your horse is unsure.

At times you will have to deviate slightly from the marked route to avoid crossing locks. The lock keepers will probably not let you try and cross anyway as the prospect of a horse panicking half way across a lock gate is a serious one. (Aberchalder is one such place where you need to cross the swing bridge and follow the north side rather than the south bank.)

Remember most of all this is to be enjoyed and not on sufferance to break records. If you are unsure of your capabilities go for shorter days and more of them - or just do half of it to start with which is still 4 good days riding for about 4 - 5 hours a day. In any case if you are inexperienced it is best to keep the first few days under 5 hours and break it into smaller sections.

Fitness

You and your horse should be reasonably fit and the horse easily able to sustain at least 3-4 hours riding a day mostly at walk but also at trot and on occasions canter if conditions allow. Riding for 20 minutes every other day in an arena then expecting to go and do it is unfair on the horse and will also put you in pain too. Prior to going have at least 2 or 3 long hacks of about 3h minimum duration the week before and see how your horse copes. In particular if it sweats up too much or is failing towards the end then it is not fit enough for what you are about to ask of it.

You too should be physically fit and able to both ride and walk, mount and dismount without any difficulty.

The Horse

Horses should be re-shod soon before going on the GGW. Much of the way is on hard forestry tracks and there are quite a few stretches on tarmac. Tack should be simple and convenient as well as comfortable for the horse. The use of an endurance-type combined bridle and headcollar is useful as it also allows you to remove the bit at longer rest times such as lunch or when leading the horse in difficult terrain if the bit may wrench on the mouth.

Check regularly for any hot-spots on the girth or saddle. Ticks and other parasites are a problem on the way as you traverse areas not farmed and which are grazed by deer and other wild animals. Ensure your horse is regularly wormed. Use flyspray and also consult your vet about use of a long term pyrethrin- or permethrin-based pesticide which will kill and deter ticks and fleas as the ticks can carry disease to both horse and humans.

Water is generally available but there are some stretches involving steep tiring climbs and other where water is limited in hot weather so let your

animal drink when you can. There is usually some sort of grazing about for longer stops.

Do not ask too much of your mount and consider dismounting for any steep climbs - especially later in the day or if it is very hot. Anything other than a gentle descent is always best dismounted as this is very hard on the horses and they are prone to slip on some parts of the way.

At other times give the horse (and yourself) a break by dismounting and walking for a bit.

The Rider

Scottish weather is notorious for being wet, damp and highly changeable. You need to be dressed and prepared for four seasons at all times.

Small saddle bags are available which are ideal for a couple of first-aid dressings, mobile phone, lunch, drinks, map and so on. A fleece top and waterproofs can be tied on the outside across the back or front of the saddle. Footwear should be suitable and comfortable for both riding and walking.

As some sections are on road, a high-visibility vest is recommended. A knife and pliers or multi-tool as well as some string are always useful. The multi-tool will allow you to draw the nails to fully remove a shoe if necessary as there are occasions where you will be some distance from any assistance. Ask your farrier to show you how to remove the nails with pliers so you know how to if you are caught with a partially cast shoe on the way.

Mobile reception is good for the most part - especially the earlier stages. Have with you numbers for the GGW rangers - they can be of assistance for various problems such as a locked gate that should not be locked!

The Route

This bit is really up to the individual and will be dependant on many factors. The experienced will be well able to sort out their own route and day to day planning

As a good introduction to long distance riding for the novice though the following can be recommended:

Rather than starting in the middle of Fort William (unless you are dedicated to doing the 'whole thing') Neptune's staircase is a good starting point with Auchnacarry/Clunes being a good first overnight stop.

Day two up to Laggan and the Great Glen Water Park (another route deviation here - you will need to follow the minor road out to the A82 as the footpath crosses the canal locks at Laggan.)

Day 3 from Laggan to Fort Augustus

By now you will have a feel for what you are doing and both your and the horse's capabilities and can plan ahead as you see fit

For example Day 4 from FA to Invermoriston if you want a short day - Drumnadrochit if you want a long one or Alltsigh which is a good compromise but horse access is about 1 km west of the youth hostel off the A82

Next stops can be worked out as you wish. There is a good forest carpark at Abriachan but the road up to it is very steep if you take the most direct one from the A82 - the one from Lagnalean is better.

Again unless you are a purist a pick up at Leachkin may prove much easier than battling round the city with a horse, horsebox and so on.

To travel or Camp?

The assistance of a horsebox and willing driver is a great asset - in fact it is essential for the novice as it allows flexibility in the planning - if the weather is too bad or you want to go further then you are not tied to a rigid schedule. It is possible to do it without vehicle support using B&B or hotels along the way each night and some places will give you overnight grazing but this will really need organising before hand and probably a weekend in a car prior to the event sorting things out. Also if the weather is poor you cannot carry horse rugs and some places will only offer a field with no shelter. So the convenience of a vehicle and horsebox to carry such equipment is almost essential - and you'll probably have one to get there anyway! It also allows you to pick a base point or a couple of places where you know there is good accommodation and stabling. Fort William, Fort Augustus and Drumnadrochit are all excellent bases with the mid-point location of Fort Augustus in particular allowing you to base yourself there for the duration if desired.

To Sum Up

Do not be deterred by what is written above - for the experienced and novice long distance rider alike, riding the great glen way is a wonderful experience but it will be made more so by some common-sense planning and preparation and a few words of wisdom from some who have done it. Common sense sums it up really - for example there is little joy in battling into poor weather late in the day (for either horse or rider) when it may be easier all round to shorten your day and perhaps make time up elsewhere later in the event.

There is no doubt it will bring your horse home fitter, better mannered and with a much stronger bond between rider and horse than before you went - for all that alone it is a worthwhile thing to do - but do not fall into the trap of attempting too much too soon or finishing at all costs. You can always come back!!

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