

Scottish Travel

JOURNEY THROUGH BEN, LOCH AND GLEN

Alice Rickard took on the IGO Adventures Scotland Weekend with all the gear but no idea of the physical challenge ahead – and wouldn't have it any other way

It's all right for Ben Fogle to row across the Atlantic or skip up Everest, but the rest of us have got actual jobs to go to on Monday. I love a life-changing challenge as much as your next weekend warrior, but what to do if you haven't got the holiday time it takes to achieve it?

One answer is the IGO Adventures Scotland Weekend: roughly 30 miles in two days by canoe and foot through glen, loch and ben in Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park. The brainchild of former polo player and Atlantic rower Bobby Melville, IGO Adventures – strapline "Touch the Wild" – offers two- to nine-day multi-discipline challenges in 10 stunning locations, such as Norway, Montana and Morocco – and now round Loch Lomond. I dust off my midge net and head to Luss.

FRIDAY 2PM

So here I am, loaded up like a camel with borrowed backpacks on my first ever camping experience – no, wait, challenge. Not entirely sure what I have signed up for, I nervously chatter to as many of the 60 participants I can. Much to my relief, a few of them, like me, are "all the gear, no idea".

The Loch Lomond Arms is the base of our event briefing, and for our last substantial meal of the weekend, a feast of haggis, neeps and tatties. Busy shovelling down every carb I can lay my eyes on, I miss most of the briefing, but catch an announcement not to urinate in the same place we bathe. Shuffling to the start line for part one of the challenge – an unguided 6.2-mile run to the campsite – it dawns on me that, instead of showers, we will shortly be washing in a river.

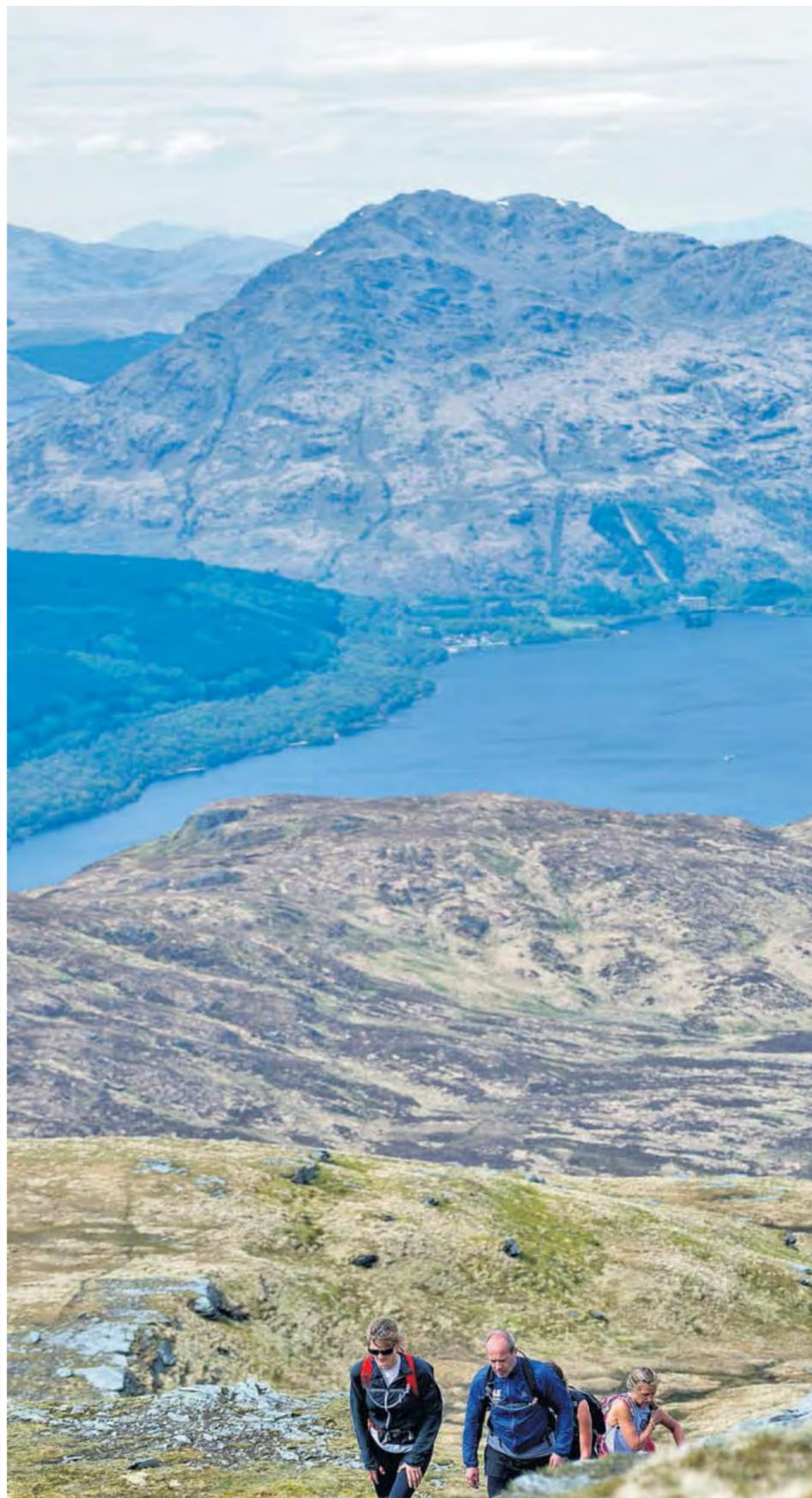
FRIDAY 4PM

Partly running, partly jogging, mainly walking, I am feeling pretty chuffed with myself when after two hours I can spot the white tops of tents in Glen Douglas, a beautiful, empty valley west of Loch Lomond. Riding high on confidence, I join others cooling down in the ice-cold river that runs alongside the camp.

Camp feels more like a festival than the base camp to a gruelling physical



The adventurers hiked and paddled more than 30 miles through the glorious Loch Lomond and the Trossachs national park – but the campsite, above, felt more like a festival



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challenge. There are groups huddled by a fire, others are practising yoga; most of the men are engrossed by a Bear Grylls type showing them how to make fire. Aware that I have a lot of hiking and canoeing to do the next day, I decide to get some shut-eye.

SATURDAY 7AM

Bagpipes, really loud bagpipes – I wake up with a start in a damp and dewy tent and want to pull the covers back over my head. Instead, I open up the tent to find the sun bearing down through the valley. I watch our private morning concert in the middle of nowhere, and smile. As I fumble around trying to eat porridge with a fork – I forgot to pack a spoon – today's challenge details are revealed: a 2.5-mile run, a 2.5-mile canoe trip and an eight-mile trek up and down Ben Lomond. All in one day. I've got this.

The start line today is filled with more companions than competitors, after bonding the night before. The first stretch involves a gentle jog through the valley and country lanes to Loch Lomond, after which we are partnered up and issued a canoe with little guidance, just a lifejacket, paddle and a point in the direction of Ben Lomond. Following an hour-long paddle across the loch, we hand back our canoes to waiting IGO guides. It is at this point that the challenge really begins.

SATURDAY 1PM

Already worn out from the run and canoe I start my ascent. Every 20 minutes I need to stop. I convince myself it is to look back and appreciate the views, but the reality is that I am exhausted. I need the break.

Six hours since setting off, I find myself hobbling up the final steps of Ben Lomond, so high that I am now walking across snow. Every step comes with sharp shooting pains down the backs of my legs. It seems impossible until a kind gentleman called Pablo motivates me with news I am less than five minutes from the top.

I summit the 3,196ft-high mountain. A rush of pride, joy and sheer relief surges through me. The aches and pains are soon healed by the perfect 360-degree view of the Trossachs and the entire length of Loch Lomond. Sitting down with my squashed cheese sandwich to enjoy this expansive landscape, I suddenly realise: some experiences are challenging, but every challenge is an experience.

The next Scotland Weekend is Aug 31 to Sept 2 (£545; igoadventures.com). To read Alice's Insta-story about the event, see instagram.com/stories/highlights/17946758539042267/

GREAT BRITISH BREAKS

EAST NEUK OF FIFE

Find cosy fishing villages and wild walks in Scotland's secret corner

WHY?

It's only an hour across the Firth of Forth from Edinburgh, yet the East Neuk (literally "nook") is a magical, beach-fringed back of beyond. St Andrews is the big hitter, but all along the peninsula there are crab shacks and coastal walks, lobster-pot fishing villages and snug pubs.

WHAT YOU DO

Start in **St Andrews**, a clutch of stone turrets and ancient wynds that echoes to the mewl of gulls. Chariots of Fire selfies are obligatory on **West Sands** – the two-mile stretch across the dunes from the Old Course where they shot the film's famous opening. Then head up via the 12th-century cathedral ruins for a wander around the junk shops and galleries before having an ice cream at Nardini's (nardinis.co.uk).

Ten miles southeast is **Crail**, the perfect East Neuk fishing village, with cobbled lanes that tumble down to a stonewalled harbour. Look for the shed where the Reilly family sell fresh crab and lobster rolls (from £2; daily except Mondays until October 1).

Fancy a coastal yomp? The four-mile stretch from Crail to **Anstruther** is the best section of the 117-mile **Fife Coastal Path** (fifecoastalpath.co.uk), offering a string of beaches, views of Bass Rock and the **Isle of May**, and an excuse to pop into the Haven for haddock and chips overlooking Cellardyke harbour (£9.95; haven-restaurant.co.uk).

As you're in Anstruther, take a look at the **Scottish Fisheries Museum** (scottishmuseum.org), which is a million times more interesting than it sounds, with historic boats and casts of bizarre, deformed fish. Or take a ferry to the Isle of May, summer home to a crowd of 250,000 puffins, kittiwakes, razorbills and guillemots. You'll see seals and, if you're lucky, whales and dolphins (£26, children £13; isleofmayferry.com).

It's a half-hour hike from Anstruther to **Pittenweem**, known for the summer arts festival that takes over every garden, living room and pub (August 4-12; pittenweemartsfestival.co.uk). Also in the village is **St Fillan's**, a 7th-century shrine inside a smuggler's cave: collect the key at the Pittenweem Chocolate Company (pittenweemchocolate.co.uk).

At the end of the Neuk is **Elie**, a mile-long crescent of golden sand. Watch beach cricket from the Ship Inn's sea-wall beer garden every other Sunday until September 2. Or play golf: the course here has all the charm of the Old Course, but none of its queues (from £80; golfhouseclub.co.uk).

Wet day? **Scotland's Secret Bunker** – a nuclear facility hidden under a dummy farmhouse and kept in the shadows for 40 years until 1993 – offers a fascinating glimpse of Cold War paranoia. The tour will leave young Bonds shaken and stirred (£12/£8; secretbunker.co.uk).



FISH AND SHIPS The bijou port of Anstruther



WHERE YOU STAY

The posh **Old Course Hotel**, in St Andrews, has a rooftop spa, an indoor pool, a restaurant with three AA rosettes, and views over the Old Course and the sea (doubles from £205, B&B; oldcoursehotel.co.uk).

The **Ship Inn**, in Elie, is simpler but stylish, with six recently refurbished, blue-panelled, white-shuttered rooms; four of them have lovely bay views (doubles from £130, B&B; shipinn.scot).

WHERE YOU EAT

Get up early and you'll see your fish being landed on the harbour by the **Fish Bar**, in Anstruther. It's filled to the gills with awards, and rightly so (haddock and chips from £6.30; anstrutherfishbar.co.uk).

If posh nosh is more your thing, you can enjoy the same Anstruther catch cooked with two-AA-rosette flair – and terrace dining right by the sea on sunny days – at **Craig Millar @ 16 West End**, three miles down the coast in the quaint, multicoloured village of St Monans (two-course lunch £22, three-course dinner £45; 16westend.com).

Jeremy Lazell

“The golf course at Elie has all the charm of St Andrews, but none of its queues