

Highland highlights

THE SCOTTISH Highlands boast such a large tract of often inaccessible, often wild and always utterly scenic landscapes that it can be hard to choose where to visit.

The Cairngorms National Park (CNP) helpfully solves this problem, as it has all the best parts of the Highlands rolled into one easily navigable whole. The reserve offers everything from scenic steam railway rides and pony trekking, right through to hill walks, mountain biking and, of course, even a generous dram of whisky distilleries to savour.

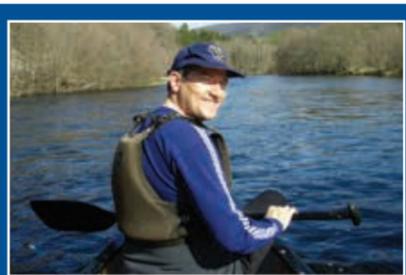
It is easily the largest national park in Britain, extending over 1,400 square miles.

It is a truly epic landscape that is home to five of Britain's six highest mountains. There are also sweeps of moorland, thick Caledonian Forest and gushing rivers to explore.

This wildscape is alive with wildlife, from bountiful red deer and the endan-



Above, the Cairngorms National Park is a paradise for walkers. Top picture, Loch Morich frozen over during the Highland winter.



Mountains, forests, moors, wildlife and whisky – Robin McKelvie samples the charms of Britain's largest national park

gered red squirrel, right through to the even rarer capercaillie and the mighty osprey – the bird of prey that was re-introduced to Britain in this very national park.

This year has been designated the Year of Natural Scotland and this remarkable natural oasis brings you as close to nature as it's possible to be.

The ideal introduction to the CNP is the highest mountain railway in Britain (www.cairngormmountain.com). In eight minutes, it whisks you safely up the mountain of Cairngorm itself to a height that many people would probably never be able to hike to.

A visitor centre awaits that comes complete with viewing points and both the UK's highest café and restaurant, the Ptarmigan. The views from up here are jaw-dropping.

Back down the mountain, the Rothiemurchus Estate (www.rothiemurchus.net) tempts. This is one of the best-preserved oases of original Caledonian Forest left in Scotland. Its aim is to offer activities for everyone, whether you are seven or 70.

Choose from pony trekking and clay pigeon shooting, through to dog sledging and 4x4 off-road driving. They have enough here to keep you going for weeks.

Two of the most popular activities in Rothiemurchus are walking and mountain biking, as indeed they are the most

popular pastimes throughout the park. The possibilities are endless, whether you want to just enjoy a gentle stroll around the shores of an ice-blue loch or along the banks of the River Spey (which you can canoe down, too), test your climbing abilities on the UK's second highest mountain or bash down the slopes on a mountain bike.

A more genteel trip is on offer from Aviemore's gorgeous old timber Victorian railway station. Aviemore is the main resort in the national park, so the chances are you will be here at some point and the opportunity to ride the Strathspey Railway (www.strathspeyrailway.co.uk) should not be missed.

The centuries peel back as this vintage train eases out of Aviemore in a nostalgic wash of steam and chugs through open countryside towards Boat of Garten and on to Broomhill.

Boat of Garten has one of the most picturesque golf courses in Scotland (www.boatgolf.com). It's open to visitors. More recently, it has been joined in Aviemore by the Spey Valley Championship Course (<http://resorts.macdonaldhotels.co.uk/spey-valley>).

This tough thick heather and tight fairway laden 7,200 yards monster is always a treat to play, as it opens up views of the River Spey and the surrounding mountains.

Some of the walks between holes are lengthy, so you might want to hire a buggy.

The Spey Valley course's Clubhouse Bar makes for a great 19th hole, with its Scottish Steak Club Restaurant serving the finest Highland beef. A cheaper and more informal option is the Mountain Café (www.mountaincafe-aviemore.co.uk) on Aviemore's main street.

Their freshly ground Highland beef burgers are the stuff of legend, best enjoyed on their terrace with a view of the mountains. Their home-made cakes are also the perfect fuel for a day of adventure.

'The distillery is as fitting a welcome to the Cairngorms as its dram is a fitting way to end a day'

Want to know more?

www.cairngorms-park.com
www.visitscotland.com

The national park is also home to a volley of cosy pubs, where you can savour the tastebud tickling ales brewed by Aviemore's Cairngorm Brewery.

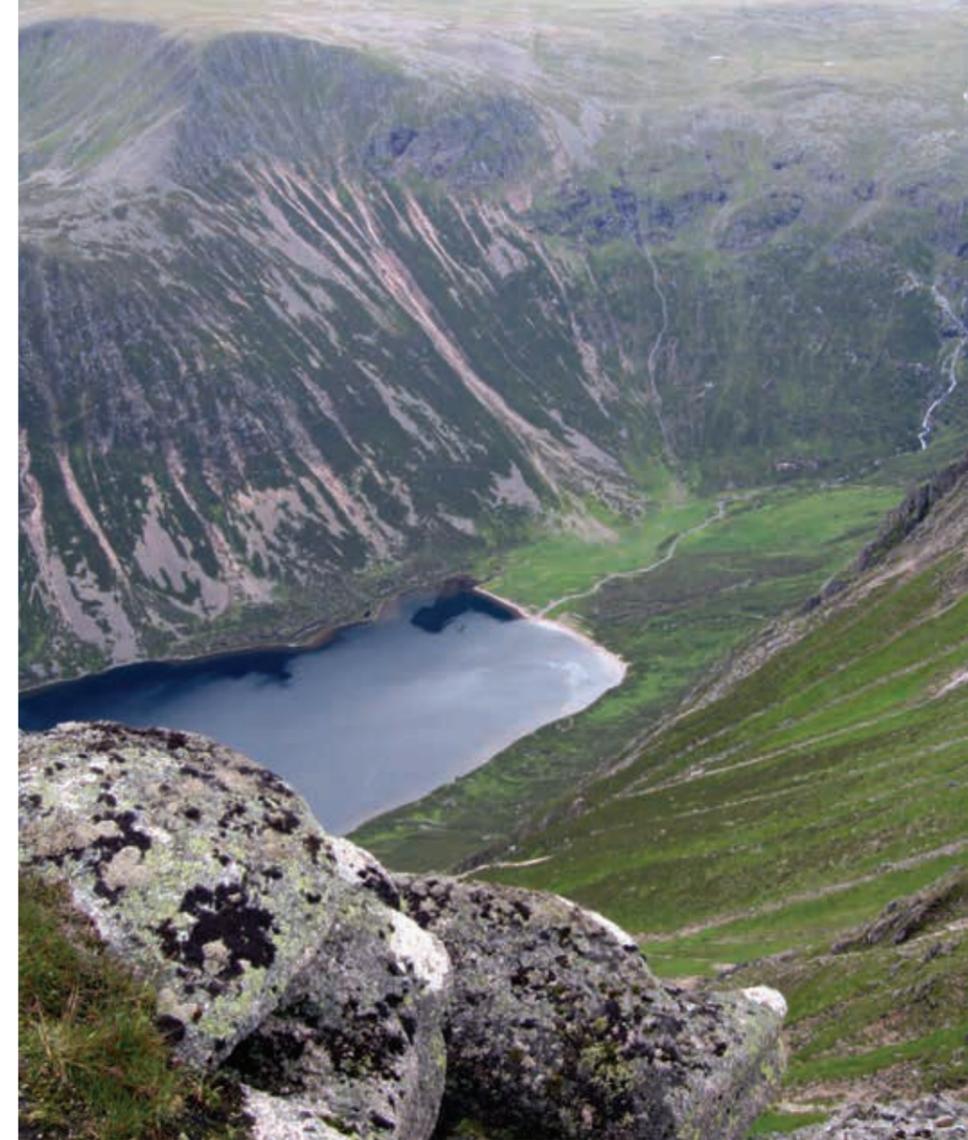
The Old Bridge Inn (www.oldbridgeinn.co.uk) overlooks the River Spey and dishes up the likes of steamed langoustines and 10oz Aberdeen Angus ribeye steaks, as well as its ales on tap.

In Boat of Garten, the Boat Hotel (www.boathotel.co.uk) has the Osprey Bar, with a bistro on hand serving Speyside venison and Cullen Skink, the famously hearty fish chowder that originated in this part of the world.

Whichever bar or restaurant you choose, you can finish off the night in traditional Highland style with a wee dram.

Of course, you'll have to select carefully a whisky that comes from the national park. The CNP has a sprinkling of Speyside distilleries, but the most dramatically located is Dalwhinnie in the south of the park.

This grand white-washed dame sits surrounded by a swathe of Highland mountains and greets you as you enter the national park. The distillery is as fitting a welcome to the Cairngorms as its dram is a fitting way to end a day wrapped in the multiple charms that lie within this compelling corner of the Highlands.



Mountain biking is a popular sport in the national park, and the views are simply spectacular.

Scottish Traditional Boat Festival

The historic burgh of Portsoy, Aberdeenshire, with its preserved twin harbours, is the ideal setting for a festival that celebrates a long-gone era of classic boat design, as well as the area's rich maritime heritage. Look out for exhilarating skiff races on the open sea and demonstrations of maritime and rural crafts, and there are concerts and parties. Food and drink are an integral part of the mix, with local favourite Cullen Skink often on the menu. This year's festival takes place on June 22-23. For more details, visit www.stbfportsoy.com