

“HOW ARE YOU GETTING BACK?”
THE GREAT OUTDOOR CHALLENGE 2023

SUE CHALMERS

“How are you getting back?” asked the driver of the 08.00 Arbroath to Oban service. On a bus full of day-trippers, I was one of the few without a return booking. “I’m walking,” I replied, nervously pointing at my pack. “Yes, all the way”.



After months of planning, I was finally heading for the start of my 12-day backpacking journey from the west to the east coast of Scotland. The rules of the The Great Outdoor(TGO) Challenge are straightforward: “Challengers” set off from one of 14 starting points, between Portavadie in the south and Torridon in the north and must follow their planned route all the way to their chosen point on the east coast between Fraserburgh and Montrose, within a 15-day window in May. The whole journey must be completed on foot and be self-supported. It was a relief finally to set off from Oban, (see photo to the left) and my route through rolling hills dotted with gorse bushes was unexpectedly pretty, but the

bright Spring morning rapidly developed into three hot days. The heat, the pack and the road-walking resulted in aches and pains everywhere to the extent that I began to doubt my ability to keep to my scheduled daily distance and to consider rationing my five Nurofen tablets.

By Day 5, I had completed the long haul up the north-west shore of Loch Etive, (see below) up to the King’s House, across Rannoch Moor and north-west over *Beinn Mholach* (841m) to Loch Garry.



Photo credit Sue Chalmers

I had regretfully refused the offer of a lift in a boat up Loch Etive from Cadderlies Bothy and walked above the clouds on *Beinn Maol Chaluim* (846m) and enjoyed cake at Rannoch Station, where I also picked up my first resupply parcel. Perhaps one of the most unexpected highlights of my trip was arriving hot and tired on the shores of Loch Rannoch, gratefully dropping my pack beside a picnic table, only to be offered a gin and tonic by a friendly campervan owner!

The weather was now a little cooler but remained dry, my aches and pains had eased, and I had settled into a routine of an early start, a long day's walk, dinner and sleep. My hopes of a successful crossing rose, only to be dashed in Dalnaspidal when a painful, swollen ankle halted progress. Fearing that my Challenge was over, I limped back to a suitable camp spot, threw up the tent beside a phone mast, sought sympathy via WhatsApp, and fell asleep.

A good night's rest brought some relief, and I headed north into the remote Gaick Pass shod in one boot and one Croc taking every opportunity to soak my ankle in cooling burns. Very early in the morning of Day 7, I stood on the summit of *A'Chaoirnich* (875m) the second of my Gaick Corbetts, both ferociously steep hills with tops which look as if they have been smoothed off with a pallet knife. I was 52 km from Muir Cottage and suddenly confident of success. After such a dry Spring, the Feshie was easily forded (another source of earlier anxiety) and I knew I was homeward bound.

I don't think I have ever been quite as happy to see Muir Cottage as I was on this occasion. The familiar surroundings and the chance to shower, wash clothes, pack the contents of my last resupply parcel and sleep in a bed were all wonderfully refreshing.

Although I still had four days of walking ahead of me, I felt relaxed about this final section on familiar territory. After an afternoon enjoying the sunshine filtering through the pines of the Balmoral Estate, I decided to press on to Gelder Shiel in the hope that I would meet other Challengers there. Arriving at the bothy around 8.30 pm, I found one gently snoring tent and one person fast asleep in the bothy. Ah well, so much for the famous TGO camaraderie!

The last three days passed in a now agreeably familiar way. In the dense network of tracks between Tarfside and Glen Dye, I met a well-meaning hill



walker who could not be convinced that I was not lost or in danger. Charr Bothy offered the chance of a night under a roof, but I opted for one last nostalgic, if damp, camp in Glen Dye. Then came the last 30 km through Fetteresso, a long day with little water en route. Both of these factors had worried me at the planning stage but neither mattered in the end. A final brew used my last teabag. As I ticked off the kilometres, friends texted, impatient to help me with the pack I no longer noticed. All the planning, which had soaked up January days, the trips to drop off supplies and the twelve absorbing, birdsong-filled days of walking ended almost abruptly as I stood on the beach at Stonehaven. And yes, I walked all the way!

Stonehaven Beach