

WHW Day 8: Kinlochleven to Fort William
By Mark Lorenzoni

It seemed so fitting that we started the last day of our West Highland Way journey with almost the exact same weather we began with, eight days ago: scattered showers that rained down through low lying clouds. Even though our middle four days had treated us to sunshine and blue skies, the bookend days of our walk had been gray with spotty rain and, weird as it may sound, we had grown to love and embrace this classic wet Scottish weather as it painted a totally different canvas of misty clouds, shrouding the peaks of those magnificent green Highland mountains.

We had stayed up a bit later than normal, after dinner the night before, chatting with Neil, our hospitable Scottish innkeeper, who had filled us with wonderful and humorous Highland tales and warm whiskey. He had given us a heads up that, due to the rain and clouds, we most likely wouldn't be able to get the full visual of the towering Ben Nevis, Great Britain's tallest mountain, as we came upon Fort William at the end of today's final leg.

And as we climbed up the steep mountain path, leading away from the village of Kinlochleven on our 16 mile hike to Fort William, we already got a sneak preview of what Neil had been talking about, as we could only catch brief glimpses through the clouds of the long loch way down below. After a few miles we came upon a seemingly endless valley, wedged in between yet another series of towering Highlands. Our rocky path, which seemed to go on forever, was continually interrupted by mountain streams that we forged with our trusty poles and boots...boots, that, despite all the many miles of mud and rain, remained surprisingly waterproof.

After about twelve miles we caught our first glimpse of the mighty Ben Nevis, towering up over all of the other mountains, that now seemed outclassed and outsized by this iconic giant wonder. This meant that Fort William, the final stop of our one hundred mile West Highland Way journey, was only a few miles down the path.

After passing by the shadows of the great Ben Nevis, which just like our Scottish innkeeper had forecasted, it's peak was shrouded in clouds, our mood suddenly grew more quiet and pensive, for we knew that with each passing mile of today's last leg we were sadly inching closer to the end of this amazing journey northward through the wilds of Scotland's stunningly beautiful and rugged Highland mountains. Despite the rain, the mud and the puddles, the insanely steep descents, the cautious navigating over slippery moss covered boulders, ascending 1800 feet straight up something scary called the "Devil's Staircase" and fighting off swarms of pesky midges, Cynthia and I had experienced, along with my sister and brother in law, a truly memorable journey...one that, despite or tired legs, we simply didn't want to end.

As we traversed the grassy paths leading down from the foothills around Fort William, the drizzle stopped and the sun broke through the late afternoon clouds. We could now clearly see the rooftops and spires of this loch town, the second largest in the Highlands, just down below. I

suddenly felt a lump in my throat, for we were now only minutes away from the end of our journey. We then popped off the path and onto sidewalks, which felt so strange after having been only on dirt, grass or rock paths for the past eight days.

And just like that it came to an abrupt end. The WHW commemorative plaque and statue, which we suddenly came upon in the middle of the village square, sadly signaled the end of our one hundred mile journey. We asked a passerby to take some photos of us and as we smiled for the camera, the four of us held each other tightly, clinging to the wonderful memories of one of the best experiences of our lives.

Mark Lorenzoni would be delighted to answer any questions you might have about he and his wife's 100 mile West Highland Way and 200 mile Walk Across England Coast to Coast hikes, especially if you're thinking about doing one yourself. He can be reached by calling the Ragged Mountain Running and Walking Shop or by texting him at 434/962-1694.