
Suilven

Ascent — about 700 metres

Difficulty — a long strenuous walk with a steep climb

Duration — 8–10 hours there and back

Start — grid reference [NC 086 194]

The Torridonian Sandstone peak of Suilven is one of the most distinctive and striking mountains in Britain.

At 731 metres high it is not a Munro, but its unique shape and isolation make it very popular with walkers. Its ascent involves a long day's walk and a steep climb; it should only be undertaken by experienced hillwalkers. There are three popular approaches to Suilven; the route from Inverkirkaig is probably the most scenic and is described here. If you have more than one car, you may want to leave one at Glencanisp Lodge on the north side of Suilven to turn the walk into a circuit. Those who do not intend to climb Suilven may wish to walk up the charming Kirkaig valley as far as the Falls of Kirkaig and the Fionn Loch.

One kilometre south of the village of Inverkirkaig there is a riverside car park close to a bookshop and cafe. The walk starts here and follows a well-made path along the bank of the River Kirkaig, signposted to the Falls of Kirkaig. In the first kilometre, the path passes through delightful birch, hazel and rowan woods, and then climbs out of the woods onto heathery moorland, passing over outcrops of banded Lewisian Gneiss. Follow this path for another 2 kilometres or so above the valley, until you round a bend and gain your first view of Suilven.

Several hundred metres further on, a signpost points the way to a steep path down to the spectacular Falls of Kirkaig [1] [NC 11160 17851], well worth the small detour. The river cascades over a 20 metre high rock cliff into a peaty black plunge pool, where if you are lucky you may see salmon in the summer. Reaching the pool requires some scrambling down over steep rocky steps, but the falls can also be viewed from higher vantage points on the path. Large volumes of water tumble over these falls, some of it having flowed from a source far to the east on the slopes of Breabag. The river has cut its V-shaped valley into a broad trough that was originally scoured by glaciers during the Ice Age.

Return to the main path and continue eastwards. You are soon rewarded with a magnificent view of Suilven, rising abruptly from a platform of Lewisian Gneiss. To the right are Cùl Mòr, Cùl Beag and the jagged ridge of Stac Pollaidh. After a few hundred metres, there is a crumbling cairn, marking a left turn onto a path that becomes rather boggy but gradually improves. This path passes through a little notch in a low ridge [2] [NC 11803 17890]; straight ahead is the western end of Fionn Loch. If you are very lucky, you may see red-throated or black-throated divers on the loch.

On the other side of the loch are curiously flat heathery terraces a few metres above the current water level. These flat surfaces indicate that the loch level was formerly considerably higher. At the time when the last ice sheet was melting, the loch was probably over twice as deep as it is today. Mud and sand deposited at the edge of the loch at that time have now been left high and dry, forming the terraces. At that time, Fionn Loch drained through Gleann Sgoilte to the north-west. After the ice sheet had melted, probably around 10 000 years ago, the loch level dropped and water was diverted over the Falls of Kirkaig. The path bends to the north around the western end of Fionn Loch, where you cross a small stream in a broad valley. When the water level was higher, the loch would have filled this valley, joining with Loch Uidh na Ceardaich to the north-west.

The path turns south-east, roughly following the north shore of Fionn Loch. After crossing several rocky knolls, you reach a wide, flat, heathery area, where several large, red-brown boulders of Torridonian Sandstone can be seen by the side of the path. The bedrock in this area is Lewisian Gneiss, so the boulders are glacially transported erratics. Look out for the bleached white stumps of Scots pines in the peat on the path; these are many thousands of years old, and have been preserved in the peat since the trees died.

As you continue, Suilven drawing ever nearer, you cross a rocky pass with a small cairn and a path leading off to the left; ignore this, as it leads up beneath the crags of Suilven's western peak. Continue until you come to another broad, flat peat-covered stretch of ground with a prominent rocky cleft, blocked by a knoll, in front of you. Shortly after you pass a small white cairn [3] [NC 14399 16766], a boggy path leads left towards Suilven, climbing up to the left of a little stream that flows from below the Bealach Mòr.

As the path flattens out, there are outcrops on the left of red beds of Torridonian Sandstone [4] [NC 15113 17600]; these beds, with layers full of pebbles of gneiss, directly overlie the Lewisian Gneiss. This contact, or unconformity, represents a time gap of more than 600 million years. During this time the Lewisian Gneiss was eroded into a series of hills and valleys, which were then covered by the Torridonian Sandstone. To your right there are rounded outcrops of pale-coloured gneiss at a level higher than the Torridonian Sandstone. This is due to the presence of a fault, or major fracture in the rocks, that runs through Bealach Mòr, down towards the stream. Millions of years ago, the rocks of the western half of Suilven were moved down this fault by about 100 metres.

The path climbs a steep scree slope, following the line of a debris flow, where rocks have been washed down the mountain. As the rocks moved down the mountain side, they gouged out a gully with boulders forming ridges on either side of it. The path rises steeply up one of these ridges (known as levées).

High in the path, you pass outcrops with cross-bedded layers of sandstone full of pebbles, separated in places by thin layers of softer, finer grained sandstone [5] [NC 15335 18142].

A short distance above the first outcrops, you reach the saddle of Bealach Mòr [6] [NC 15784 18124]. Turn left and pass through the gap in the solid stone wall that crosses the bealach; the origin of this wall is rather mysterious! A short climb with some easy scrambling leads to Caisteal Liath (the Grey Castle), the main top of Suilven [7] [NC 15290 18346].

From the summit, you can see the 'cnoc-and-lochan' landscape of Lewisian Gneiss below you on all sides, with many small lochs in hollows that were scoured out by glaciers. The streamlined shape of Suilven was also sculpted by glacier ice, flowing from east to west.

Most of the high mountains around you are built from the same Torridonian Sandstone as Suilven. However, Quinag to the north and Canisp to the east have sharp grey peaks that are capped by Cambrian Quartzite. Cùl Mòr, to the south, has a north-facing corrie that contained a glacier about 12 000 years ago. Out to sea you can see the Summer Isles, close at hand, and the Western Isles in the distance.

Retrace your steps via the River Kirkaig path.

If you have been able to arrange transport at the bottom, the route can be varied by descending northwards and walking out to Glencanisp Lodge.

Figures

(Figure 66) Suilven. Painting of walk by Elizabeth Pickett.

(Figure 67) The Falls of Kirkaig.

(Figure 68) Suilven from Fionn Loch. Flat heathery terraces can be seen just above the loch.

(Figure 69) Suilven from the south-west.

(Figure 70) Pebbly layers in Torridonian Sandstone on the southern slopes of Suilven.

(Figure 71) Debris flow below Bealach Mòr.

(Figure 72) Cross-bedded sandstone on the steep slope below Bealach Mòr.

(Figure 73) Bealach Mòr and the eastern peaks of Suilven.



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(Figure 67) The Falls of Kirkaig.



(Figure 68) Suilven from Fionn Loch. Flat heathery terraces can be seen just above the loch.



(Figure 69) Suilven from the south-west.



(Figure 70) Pebbly layers in Torridonian Sandstone on the southern slopes of Suilven.



(Figure 71) Debris flow below Bealach Mòr.



(Figure 72) Cross-bedded sandstone on the steep slope below Bealach Mòr.



(Figure 73) Bealach Mòr and the eastern peaks of Suilven.