

Prologue

IT'S A BEAUTIFUL MID-JULY AFTERNOON. DOWN BELOW – and getting closer all the time – are the blue waters of the North Sea and the green moorland pastures of the northeast Highlands.

The tiny propeller-plane is bouncing around and making whining noises. So, to take my mind off the bouncing and the whining, I do some mental arithmetic: *There are two thousand steps in a mile. So that's two million steps in a thousand miles. But we'll probably do nearer to twelve hundred miles. So that's two-and-a-half million steps, as near as dammit.*

Soon, we'll land in Wick. From there, we'll take a bus to John o'Groats. And tomorrow, we'll start walking to Land's End.

Wendy, sitting beside me, is looking happy and serene.

'Do you realize, we're going to be walking two-and-a-half million steps?' I say.

She ponders the information for a moment, then grins and says, 'Brilliant!'

I lean back in my seat and wonder what the hell I've let myself in for.



The fact is, I've always been a reluctant walker. In the early days of our marriage, I would sometimes accompany Wendy on mountain-walks in Snowdonia or the Lake District. But I'd usually get bored and grumpy within a few hours. So eventually she gave up on me and joined a walking group.

Since hitting middle age, I've become more tolerant of perambulatory excursions. They're good exercise, if nothing else. But, on the whole, I've still tended to view walking as a rather dull affair.

On the face of it, then, I'm an unlikely candidate for the 'End to End': Britain's longest long-distance walking challenge, extending from the northeastern tip of Scotland to the southwestern tip of England. But I was prompted to it by two considerations.

First and foremost, Wendy wanted to do it. In fact, she'd wanted to do it for years. And now, at the end of a five-year stint teaching in an international school in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, she'd finally found the time.

Second, I'm a sucker for a physical challenge. Like many middle-aged men, I'm engaged in a constant, bitter, and losing battle against physical decline. This means that, when I'm not devouring pasties and guzzling beer, I take grim pleasure in making my paunchy body run around, do press-ups, and perform tricks with a skipping-rope. So, in that sense, a three-month hike up and down hills carrying a heavy rucksack is right up my street.

For those reasons, when Wendy suggested End to Ending, I surprised her by saying yes.

Even so, I still had my doubts about the whole thing. After all, three months is a long time; and twelve hundred miles is a

long way; and two-and-a-half million steps – that’s an *awful* lot of steps.



The plane continues its bumpy descent. I look out of the window, and I have to admit that those blue waters and green pastures *do* look inviting.

So who knows? Wendy might be right. It could just turn out to be brilliant . . .



The beginning is the most
important part of any work.

—PLATO, *REPUBLIC*

CHAPTER ONE

First Steps

*John o’Groats – Duncansby Head – Wick –
Dunbeath – Berriedale – Helmsdale – Brora –
Golspie – Dornoch Firth – Evanton – Inverness*

THERE’S NO SET ROUTE FOR THE END TO END. YOU CAN DO it entirely along roads or you can navigate your way through forest, field, and mountain. You can take a more or less straight line or you can zigzag around, stopping off anywhere that takes your fancy. You can do it from Land’s End to John o’Groats (LEJoG) or you can do it – as Wendy and I did – from John o’Groats to Land’s End (JoGLE). You can take as much or as little time over it as you like.

All that matters is that you walk every step of the way.

If you take the direct(ish) route, along roads, the journey is about 850 miles, which means that you can do it in six weeks or less if you hoof it.

Most End to Enders, however, opt for a more scenic route, taking long-distance paths whenever possible and using roads only when necessary. These journeys are typically between eleven hundred and twelve hundred miles long, and take two to three months to complete.

Wendy and I planned to take a scenic route along some of Britain’s best-loved National Trails, including the Great Glen

Way, the West Highland Way, the Pennine Way, the Heart of England Way, the Cotswold Way, and the South West Coast Path.

The first of these, the Great Glen Way, begins at Inverness, Scotland's most northerly city, which is situated 120 miles south of John o'Groats.



For the End to Ender, there are two ways of getting from John o'Groats to Inverness. You can loop west through some of the most remote parts of the Scottish Highlands, wild-camp beneath the stars, and experience Nature at her most wild and free. Or you can trudge 120 miles along the A99 and the A9, dodge traffic, trash the soles of your feet, and endure hour upon hour of mind-numbing tedium.

Wendy and I chose the latter option.

Here's the journey in a nutshell.

You walk 118 miles by road: first from John o'Groats to Dunbeath along the A99, and then from Dunbeath to Inverness along the A9. Sometimes you have the sea on your left and rough pasture on your right. Sometimes, when the road takes you further inland, you have rough pasture on both your left *and* your right.

Sometimes, you pass through a small town or a tiny village. Occasionally, you come across a museum or a quaint harbour or a nice little beach. Every so often, you get to take a brief but delicious detour along a minor road or down a forest track. But for the most part you just plod along the A-road.

Sometimes the road is busy and wide and dangerous. At other times it is quiet and narrow and dangerous. There's rarely a footpath.

If, like Wendy and me, your budget doesn't stretch to B&Bs, then you sometimes have to walk long distances to get from one campsite to the next, unless you are the adventurous type and don't mind wild-camping in a farmer's field at the side of the road.

This means that unless you are wealthy or intrepid you never get time to explore the towns and villages, or to visit the museums and harbours and beaches. You're too busy hurrying on.

You wake up. You take down your tent. You walk. You set up your tent. You sleep. Apart from eating, that's pretty much it.

For the first day or two, you make an effort to look around as you walk: at the sea to your left and the rough pasture to your right. But you soon give up the effort. Your eyes are irresistibly drawn to the road.



Our first day's walk took us from our guesthouse in **John o'Groats** to nearby **Duncansby Head** and back again: a round-trip of about six miles.

In 2010, John o'Groats won (but refused to accept) a Carbuncle Award from *Urban Realm* magazine for being 'Scotland's most dismal town'. I have nothing to add except that it serves what is quite possibly Scotland's most dismal fish and chips from a portakabin overlooking the harbour.

Uninhabited Duncansby Head, the most northeasterly point on the Scottish mainland, and the true start/finish of the End to End challenge, is a whole other kettle of fish. With its tiny lighthouse, sea cliffs, comical puffins, sea-breezes, and stacks (large pinnacles of rock jutting out from the sea), it puts its better-known near-neighbour to shame.

On our second day, Wendy and I shouldered our backpacks (complete with tent, sleeping-mats, sleeping-bags, pillows, clothing, waterproofs, cooking equipment, toiletries, torches, first-aid kit, electronic items, and food and water) and hit the road with a vengeance.

Eight hours and sixteen miles later, we reached **Wick**, a fair-sized estuary town, which was once a major player in the herring industry.

Wick, for all I know, may have its attractions. But for me, that day, aching and weary as I was, it was nothing more than a final obstacle en route to our campsite on the outskirts of the farther side of town.

By the end of the third day – twenty hot and dusty miles from Wick to the coastal village of **Dunbeath** – I was literally groaning with pain.

Two days of carrying a thirty-five-pound rucksack had taken such a toll on my shoulders and back that I grunted and squirmed and cursed my way along the last few miles to our campsite.

Wendy, by this time limping ten or fifteen yards behind me, was in an even worse condition. Constant pounding of the tarmac road had blistered her toes so badly that they barely looked like toes any more. Every step was a triumph of will – and stupidity – over pain.

I had known beforehand that the End to End would be no picnic, that there would be times when weary muscles, sore feet, and sheer bloody tedium would test our mettle and resolve. But I had anticipated neither how quickly nor how severely we would be tested.

When I had looked ahead, in my mind's eye, at the trials and tribulations we would face, they had all seemed rather romantic. I had pictured myself battling through them with a stern and manly look on my face. But I learned very quickly that there is nothing romantic about an aching back and sore feet.



During the afternoon of that third gruelling day, as I dragged myself along the dreary ribbon of tarmac that is the A9, I kept up my flagging spirits by ruminating on some wise words from the pen of the English philosopher Bertrand Russell: ‘The secret of happiness is to understand that the world is horrible, horrible, horrible.’

At first glance, those words appear facetious: a paradoxical *bon mot* intended for amusement rather than edification. But the more you think about them, the more you realize that they are as true as they are witty, and as wise as they are true.

Take JoGLE, for example. If you set off expecting three months of jolly jaunts through the British countryside, then you're going to be sorely disappointed. You'll quickly discover that it's not all lighthouses and puffins and sea-breezes.

On the contrary, if you're going to walk all the way from John o'Groats to Land's End, then, as sure as eggs is eggs, you'll

have to endure sore feet, aching limbs, inclement weather, fatigue, accidents, disappointments, and boredom. Sometimes you'll feel like jacking the whole thing in.

But, if you know all of this beforehand, if you understand that it comes with the territory, then you can keep going. You can say to yourself, 'This was only to be expected.'

This is especially true of the A99/A9 section between John o'Groats and Inverness. Every End to Ender who's done even a modicum of research knows that it's long, it's tedious, and it's tough on your feet. So the best thing to do is to accept it; roll with it; suck it up. Because if you hang in long enough you'll eventually get back to the good stuff: to the lighthouses, the puffins, and the sea-breezes.

And it's the same with life, in general. If you blunder your way through it thinking that the world owes you or anyone else a good time, you'll be sorely disappointed. Every time you're rejected, betrayed, or frustrated, every time you encounter pain or sickness, every time you're cheated, mistreated, or defeated, you'll feel angry and aggrieved.

But if you accept that the world cares nothing for you and your plans, that it's a pitiless place where bad things happen even to good people, never mind the likes of you and me, then when bad things *do* happen you can accept them stoically and wait – or, at any rate, *hope* – for better times.

And the good news is that for most of us, most of the time, better times do come around eventually.



I was painfully conscious, as we squirmed and grunted and limped our way to Reception at the Inver Caravan Park in Dunbeath, of what a pathetic spectacle we made. But I could sum up neither the will nor the energy to try to appear anything other than I truly was: knackered.

The owner greeted us with a look of pity. She asked if we were by any chance heading for Land's End, and then comforted us by observing that she had known people arrive 'in an even worse condition'.

An hour later, having erected our backpacker tent and abandoned plans to cook dinner on our camping stove, we hobbled our way to the nearby Bay Owl pub: an ugly flat-roofed concrete building with a surprisingly good restaurant and a fine view of Dunbeath Harbour and Castle.

I knew that bad times had temporarily given way to good the moment I looked towards the bar and saw a shiny brass hand-pump, all primed and ready to deliver Trade Winds real ale.

If you have never drunk a pint of beer after toiling footsore and weary along thirty-six miles of hot and dusty road, then you can have no inkling of how good that beer tasted. It quenched my thirst; it nourished my body; it restored my spirits; it uplifted my soul.

It was more than a drink. It was consolation. It was courage. It was hope.

Consolation, courage, and hope were further restored by chips, steak-and-ale pie, and an additional half-pint of Trade Winds. Within the hour, I was able to look back with amused complacency upon the trials and tribulations of the previous

two days. I began to feel that every single body-bruising mile had been worthwhile, that, without the toil, the sweat, and the pain, I might never have appreciated the true worth of a good pint of ale.

Like many people who live in the developed world, I rarely get to appreciate food and drink properly, because I rarely sit down to a meal feeling weary and hungry, and having worked physically hard for it.

But that day, having pushed myself harder and for longer than ever before, I was primed for enjoyment. In addition to the usual pleasures of the table – the taste, texture, and aroma of the food and the gentle satisfaction of a full stomach – there was the added thrill of refuelling the muscles and the mind.

The feeling is hard to explain, but it's as though every tired and depleted cell in your body is sucking up energy and sustenance as you eat and drink. And it's sublime.

In the absence of this pleasure, we in the developed world tend to seek our culinary kicks in mere excess. Step into any Starbucks or Costa Coffee and you'll see what I mean: overweight, under-exercised punters ramming down 'coffees' laced with flavoured syrups and whipped cream, accompanied by a side-helping of cheesecake and a dollop of self-loathing.

As I sat there musing upon all of this, I began to appreciate what the Ancient Greek philosopher Epicurus meant when he wrote to a friend: 'Living on bread and water, I rejoice in the pleasure of my body and spit upon the pleasures of extravagance.'

I had thought about those words often before, and had even written about them, but only at that moment did I feel that I truly understood them.

Epicurus had shunned urban life and had set up a self-sufficient community outside the walls of Athens. This meant that when he sat down to his bread and water at the end of each working day he was primed for enjoyment. He was weary and hungry, and had worked physically hard for them.

This is why his simple fare ‘thrilled him with pleasure in the body’, and why he was able to write to the same friend: ‘Send me a little vessel of cheese, so that I can feast whenever I please.’

I had always assumed that Epicurus’s ability to enjoy a modest diet came about as a result of mental discipline, that he had somehow *willed* himself to appreciate it. But, no. It was a natural consequence of his back-to-the-land, hard-working way of life.



That night, cramped up in our tiny backpacker tent, we examined Wendy’s feet by torchlight.

Her blisters had ballooned so much that the two smallest toes on each foot looked like fluid-filled sausage-skins with toenails glued none-too-securely onto the ends. It was clear that it would be an act of folly to squeeze them into hiking boots and beat them against an unforgiving road any time soon. There was nothing for it but to hole up in Dunbeath and let Nature practise her healing arts.



The next morning, as I sat in Dunbeath's cosy little tea-room, eating jam-and-cream scones, I couldn't help but notice a certain restiveness about Wendy.

My first thought was that this was because our unscheduled stop was taking us off timetable and over budget. So I felt a twinge of irritation. Why couldn't she just relax and enjoy the moment?

But then I fancied I caught a look in her eye, which aroused my sympathy.

I have a distinct memory, from when I was about eight or nine years old, of standing at the window, at home, looking out into the street, and longing – literally *longing* – for someone to play chess with.

I had recently learned how to play, and had borrowed a bunch of chess books from the library, but I had no one to play *with*. And it was torment.

Perhaps it was my imagination, but it seemed to me that Wendy, as she gazed out of the tea-room window, was feeling the same way. Not that she wanted to play chess, of course. But she was longing to be *out there*.

The nineteenth-century American psychologist and philosopher William James wrote:

I have often thought that the best way to define a man's character would be to seek out the particular mental or moral attitude in which, when it came upon him, he felt himself most deeply and intensely active and alive. At such moments there is a voice inside which speaks and says: 'This is the real me!'

If that's true – and I believe it is – then it's the easiest thing in the world to define Wendy's character.

Wendy is, at heart, a wild woman.

She is never more active and never more alive than when she is striding along a mountain track with the wind in her hair.

I often think that what she really ought to be doing with her life is digging wells in Africa, or rehabilitating gibbons in Thailand, or fighting bush fires in Australia. But instead, she's a teacher. She's a committed one, and a caring one, and a good one. But, in my opinion, it's not really her.

And there she was, after five years cooped up in a classroom, longing to roam, and having to sit cooped up in a café, gazing out upon it all.



It was four whole days before she was ready to walk again.

That was fine by me. We had arrived in the far north of Scotland in the middle of a heatwave, which was as conducive to lounging around on a campsite as it was non-conductive to lumbering along an A-road.

I remarked earlier that the End to Ender gets little time to explore the museums and harbours and beaches along the road from John o'Groats to Inverness. But we had oodles of time to do those things at Dunbeath.

We picnicked at its sleepy little harbour, mooched around its sleepy little museum, visited its sleepy little heritage centre, and drank real ale, each evening, in the Bay Owl's sleepy little bar-room.

I enjoyed it all immensely. But for Wendy's sake I wasn't sorry, on the fifth evening, when the Bay Owl's landlord asked, 'Have ye no' gone yet?' to be able to respond, 'No. But we'll be leaving in the morning.'



When we eventually hit the road again, we understood our limitations. We weren't yet strong enough, or tough enough or fit enough to string together twenty-mile walks. Not with backpacks, anyway.

So we scrapped the punishing schedule we had set ourselves, and opted instead for a few days of short sensible walks: eight miles to Berriedale, then eight miles to Helmsdale, and then nine miles to Brora.

We walked the first section, between Dunbeath and the tiny village of **Berriedale**, in reverse. Keith and Rona, the retirement-aged proprietors of the Inver Caravan Park, drove us to a layby on the A9, just past Berriedale, and from there we returned, on foot but without backpacks, to the campsite in Dunbeath.

Apart from an outrageously steep section of road just north of Berriedale (a 13% incline over 0.8 miles), and the fact that it poured down with rain whenever we *weren't* wearing our waterproofs and turned hot and sunny whenever we *were* wearing them, it was a nice easy reintroduction to the trail.

The following morning, Keith and Rona drove us back to the same layby, and waved us goodbye as we ventured

onwards – this time, alas, *with* backpacks – to the fishing port of **Helmsdale**.

The A9 hugs the side of some coastal hills here, which makes for some pretty scenery. But it was wasted on us. We were too busy hopping on and off the narrow, litter-strewn verge, dodging traffic, to take much notice of it.

There's no campsite at Helmsdale. So we had to splash out on a B&B. This was a splendid treat even though we couldn't really afford it.

From Helmsdale we walked nine miles, with the sea to our left and moorland hills to our right, to a beachside campsite just outside the village of **Brora**.



It's impossible to walk along the A9 and remain interested in the world around you. Your eyes get drawn downward, to the road.

And when your eyes are drawn downward, your thoughts turn inward. This is all very well if you're the cheerful, happy-go-lucky type who thinks cheerful, happy-go-lucky thoughts. But if you're the brooding, introspective type, it can be a problem.

Personally, I'm the brooding, introspective type. So my natural tendency, when my eyes are glued to a tarmac road, is to depress the hell out of myself.

I'll look back at every dumb, misguided thing I've ever done, and I'll replay it and replay it. Then I'll replay it some more with variations – usually involving a wiser, better me who does everything so much better, second time around.

It's a bad habit. It's unhealthy. It's unhelpful. It's depressing. But it's strangely addictive.

Bertrand Russell discusses this kind of introspection and its pernicious consequences in the opening chapter of his 1930 book *The Conquest of Happiness*. He opens the discussion by describing how unhappy he was as a child:

At the age of five, I reflected that, if I should live to be seventy, I had only endured, so far, a fourteenth part of my whole life, and I felt the long-spread-out boredom ahead of me to be almost unendurable.

By the time he reached adolescence, he hated life so much that he often contemplated suicide. But, despite this inauspicious beginning, he learned to enjoy life as he grew older, and attributed this largely to a diminishing preoccupation with himself. Whereas in his youth he would brood upon his faults and failings and make himself thoroughly miserable, as an adult he learned to fix his attention on external things such as world affairs, various branches of knowledge, and other people.

He writes:

External interests, it is true, bring each its own possibility of pain: the world may be plunged in war, knowledge in some direction may be hard to achieve, friends may die. But pains of these kinds do not destroy the essential quality of life, as do those that spring from disgust with self.

I know from my own experience, and not merely upon Russell's authority, that external interests are key to happiness, and that the times when I have thrown myself wholeheartedly into computer programming, or teaching, or philosophy, or writing, or even chasing a rubber ball around a squash court have been the best times in my life.

But, unlike Russell, I never did kick the habit of brooding. In fact, as I have grown older, I have found myself, more and more, whenever I have leisure to think, ruminating upon my faults and failings, and falling prey to self-disgust.

So, for me, pounding along the A9, staring for hours at a ribbon of tarmac, wasn't an uplifting experience. Nor, I'm sure, did it make me the most pleasant and stimulating of companions.



From Brora, we walked six or seven miles to the coastal village of **Golspie**.

We'd intended to walk eighteen miles to Dornoch that day. But Wendy's blisters would have none of it. So at eleven o'clock we stopped at Golspie, rang around, and found a room at a B&B.

We were checked in by midday, and able to enjoy a picnic lunch and a long lazy afternoon at Golspie's attractive little harbour and beach.

The next day, we managed a seventeen-mile hike to a camp-site on the southern shore of **Dornoch Firth**.

Happily, we were able to detour off the A9 and onto small

country roads for much of the day, including a delicious three-mile section along the shore of Loch Fleet. This beautiful sea loch with its mudflats, wading birds, wildfowl, and basking seals was a slice of heaven – and a harbinger of better things to come.



From Dornoch Firth, we hiked eighteen miles to the village of **Evanton**.

Once again, we were able to leave the A9 and walk along minor roads, through woodland and farmland, for much of the day. It would have been quite pleasant had the weather not been so energy-sappingly hot, and had my feet not, by then, become so tender.

By four o'clock, when we passed through the small town of Alness, our mental and physical reserves were sorely depleted. Yet we still had four miles to go.

We dragged our tired bodies into a café, flopped down at a table, and ordered coffee and shortbread. Thirty minutes later, we emerged – to my astonishment – with renewed vigour. I never dreamed that a brief sit down, a hot drink, and a couple of biscuits could work such magic.

Sadly, further trials awaited us.

Half a mile further on, the heavens opened. Within minutes, the dry and dusty road had turned into a shallow stream, and the gutters had become a torrent. Passing traffic sent waves five feet high crashing over us.

We battled through this deluge for a few hundred yards, and

then stopped to hold crisis talks in the scanty shelter of a bus-stop. Clearly, this wasn't camping weather. But what should we do? Should we stop and try to find a B&B? Or should we press on and hope there was room in the bunkhouse at the Evanton campsite?

We elected to press on.

We arrived to find a fully occupied bunkhouse and a sodden campsite. Everything – the grass, the trees, the caravans, the campervans, the bunkhouse, the laundry, and the children's playground – was wet through and dripping, in the dreariest manner imaginable, with water.

Wettest of all was the field set aside for tents, which, for reasons I can't fathom, was situated at the bottom of a small incline.

The tents already pitched there lay in puddles two inches deep. A group of children in waterproofs and wellies were using the field as a paddling pool. And all the while the rain continued to pour down.

The situation appeared hopeless. Luckily, however, the guy who ran the campsite came along and pointed to a small patch of ground at the top of the incline, upon which it might just be possible to squeeze our backpacker tent.

It was wet and muddy, and it was getting wetter and muddier by the minute, but it wasn't actually submerged.

Grasping at this straw, Wendy and I set up a base of operations in the camp's laundry room, and spent the next hour running to and fro with bits of tent and camping equipment. Eventually, we managed to set up a passably dry shelter, and, after strewing our wet clothes around the

laundry room to dry, passed a not entirely uncomfortable night.



I recall listening to the *Philosophy Talk* radio show once, and one of the hosts, either John Perry or Ken Taylor, remarked that one of the most important things he had learned during the course of his life is that ‘good times never last and neither do bad times’.

This phrase became something of a mantra to me as I walked, often wearily and sometimes painfully, along the road to Inverness.

Whenever the going got tough – whenever my muscles ached, or my feet hurt, or my energy levels dropped, or my spirits flagged – I reminded myself that bad times don’t last.

I felt that this first, tough section of JoGLE – and, quite possibly, JoGLE as a whole – could be seen as a microcosm of human life in its constant switching back and forth between hardship and comfort, toil and repose, pain and pleasure.

The nineteenth-century German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, in his masterwork *The World as Will and Representation*, gave a striking illustration of the human condition. He said that we can think of our journey through life as being like ‘a circle of hot coals having a few cool places, a path that we have to run over incessantly’.

His point, in keeping with his reputation as the most pessimistic of philosophers, was a negative one. Namely that lasting

happiness is impossible, that the best that life has to offer is the occasional period of respite from the pain of unfulfilled desire.

But, as I limped along the final stages of our journey to Inverness, I thought of Schopenhauer's circle in a more positive way. Whenever I got tired, or sore, or fed up, I would picture myself passing over the hot coals, and think, *there's a cool patch just around the bend!*

And, surprisingly enough, that thought was sufficient to make the hard times feel not merely bearable, but also – in a weird kind of a way – worthwhile.



When walking from Evanton to **Inverness**, it's possible, with some straightforward rerouting, to avoid a big stretch of the A9 and take small roads and cycle routes instead. Wendy and I decided not to do that – though I can't remember why.

Perhaps it was because my feet had, by this time, become agonizingly tender, making me want to complete the journey using the most direct route possible. Whatever the reason, it was an excruciatingly dull seventeen-mile walk, enlivened only by the crossing, early in the day, of the mile-long Cromarty Bridge, which spans Cromarty Firth.

The last few miles, along the A9 into Inverness, and then through the city centre to our campsite on the farther side of town, were the most dispiriting and painful of JoGLE so far.

The final section of A-road is a drab, multi-lane affair. Bearable enough, I suppose, if you're hurtling along in an

air-conditioned vehicle with your favourite tunes blasting out of the stereo. But depressing as hell if you're crazy enough to be walking the damn thing: grunting under the weight of a fully laden rucksack as you make your way along a grass verge littered with cigarette butts, fag packets, crisp bags, plastic bags, empty beer cans, spat-out chewing gum, McDonald's packaging, and soiled disposable nappies.

More depressing still when you realize that it's a full hour since you first caught sight of the city, and yet you seem to be no closer to it now than you were back then.

More depressing still when you realize that you still have three miles to go, and your feet are already so sore that you can hardly bring yourself to take another step.

More depressing still when you finally get to the campsite where you are to spend the night and realize that it's an ugly compound, surrounded by an enormous security fence, in a seedy part of town.



All of that aside, Inverness is a splendid city. A 2014 survey identified it as the happiest (and therefore, I suppose, in some sense, the nicest) place in Scotland.

It has a lot going for it. It's picturesquely sited at the mouth of the River Ness, and it has a magnificent crenelated castle, a historic Old Town, a Victorian market, and oodles of riverside restaurants and pavement cafés.

More importantly, for cash-strapped backpackers like Wendy and me, who need somewhere to sit, cheap food, free

Wi-Fi, and a socket to charge their electronic devices, it has a Wetherspoon's.

We spent a much-needed rest day in Inverness: eating and drinking, buying gel-insoles for our hiking boots, and preparing ourselves physically and mentally to go off-road, onto the trail, and into the wild heart of the Scottish Highlands.

