

# The wild western Lakes

Who needs New Zealand? The Lake District has all the same drama, say Gary Blake and Wendy Johnson, and it's closer, too

**I**t couldn't have been easier, cruising up the M40 and M6, and then leaving for the undulating A-roads along the southern Cumbrian coastline, (overriding the sat nav, which tried to take short cuts over passes). Then came a right-hand fork at Gosforth, hugging the shores of West Water, keeping an eye open for sheep nestling between roadside boulders left behind by the ice-age glaciers, and – hey presto – this was New Zealand, but without having to travel the 12,000 miles to get there.

We were in the less-frequented western Lakes, where the Lake District National Park meets the Cumbrian coast – some describe it as how the Lake District used to look. Our first stop was the National Trust's Wasdale campsite, at the head of West Water, England's deepest lake and voted the best view in England. It's just a stone's throw from England's highest mountain, Scafell Pike (978m/3208 ft).

Day one began in the Wasdale Head Inn, which calls itself the 'birthplace of British climbing'. With its wood-panelled rooms and alpine photographs on the walls, it makes a welcome retreat from inclement weather and serves hearty food in its flagstone-floored bar.

As ramblers, rather than climbers, the fell walks appealed to us. We wandered around Wasdale Head, meeting the hardy Herdwick breed of hill sheep introduced by the Vikings. Behind the inn, the bridge led us to ancient packhorse routes wending their way over the mountain passes and the 'coffin trails', where coffins were dragged behind pack horses for sacred burials in Eskdale.

Our motorhome for this trip was a 6.06m-long Auto-Sleeper Executive Anniversary Edition, a return of the

legendary monocoque construction technique, celebrating Auto-Sleeper's 50th year. Built on a Peugeot Boxer with a 2.2-litre Multijet 130 turbo-diesel with six-speed gearbox, it delivered plenty of pick-up for the hills.

We liked its livery and its curves, and it was all modern comfort inside with an impressive specification level that includes a satellite TV system. Its 2.29m width was perfect for the often restricted narrow roads, it wasn't too long for reversing and had a good turning circle for towns and tight lanes.

For day two, Cumberland sausages were on the menu and Bewleys, the local butcher in Bootle, sold them by the yard. We settled for 15 inches and enjoyed a particularly tasty lunch.

Just outside Bootle, Muncaster Castle loomed on the skyline. With breathtaking views, wonderful gardens and a haunted house, this is one of the jewels in the crown of the western Lake District. Here, you can learn about Tom Fool, also known as Tom Skelton, the court jester who lived at Muncaster in the 16th century, from whose name the term 'tomfoolery' comes.

We also discovered Ravenglass, whose old houses dramatically face the tides twice daily. It has been an estuary trading port since the stone age, ☺



Kiwi **GARY BLAKE** and **WENDY JOHNSON** are travel journalists and photographers who have covered India, Australia and the Nile, as well as boat tours in Ireland





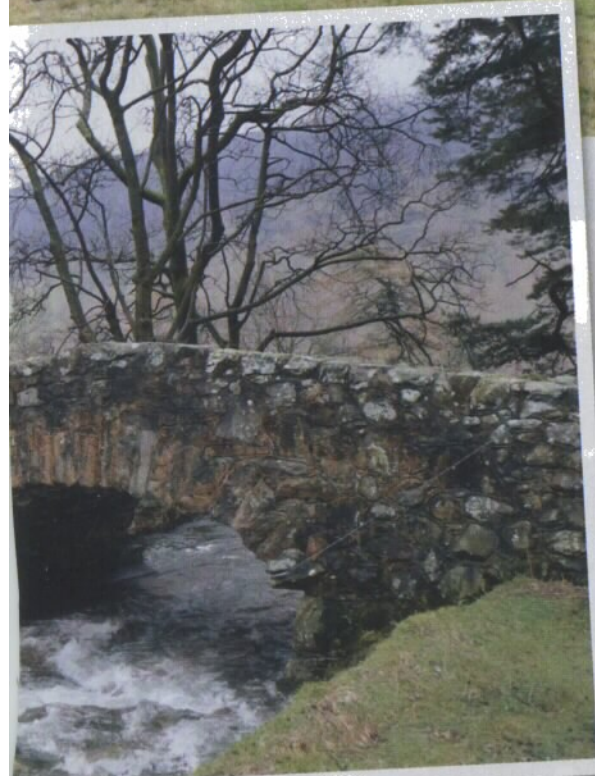
Duration  
**FIVE DAYS**



**Fabulous fells, petrifying passes and wistful waters – the dramatic western Lake District**



You can see Fleetwith Pike (*left*) and Haystacks (*right*) by taking a 4.5-mile walk around Buttermere. Below left Water under the bridge tumbles into England's deepest lake, Wast Water. Below The Executive at Casgale Crags



# HIGHLIGHTS

## SHORT TOUR

### The Lake District

and now has a beautifully run C&CC site. There were fresh flowers and tissues in its modern washrooms, and walks printed on waterproof paper in the site shop.

Close to the site is the Ravenglass and Eskdale narrow-gauge steam railway. It opened in 1875 to bring iron ore down from the mines in the hills. Now it carries visitors to the beautiful Eskdale valley. Walkers can complete a series of 10 walks around its nine halts using maps from the legendary fell walker, Alfred Wainwright, whose book *Walks from the Ratty* is inspirational. We perused it in the nearby Ratty Inn, a converted ticket office that serves wholesome food.

Just a half-mile stroll from there is the site of the large, second-century Roman fort, Glannoventa, with a remarkable bath house now known as Walls Castle. One of the largest surviving Roman structures in England, with walls over 12 feet high, it originally contained everything from saunas to cold baths.

Whitehaven, a Georgian coastal town, was our next stop. In the 1700s, it was the country's third-most important port after

London and Liverpool. It built its wealth on trading coal from nearby mines, but later imported tobacco from Virginia and sugar from the Caribbean, and inevitably became involved in the slave trade.

Sir James Lowther built the town, with its elegant, well-preserved, Georgian houses, and developed the port. There's plenty to see, and we started with the Haigs Colliery Mining Museum on the site of the famous Haig Pit, Cumbria's last deep coal mine, closed in 1986. A must are The Rum Story and The Beacon museums, which embrace and relive Whitehaven's past in lively and engaging ways.

Still west of the Cumbrian mountains and before the eastern fells take over, we found a little-known campsite behind the Wheatsheaf pub at Low Lorton. It had ten pitches on grass or hardstandings with electricity, and a warm, convivial pub.

The pub is lovely, but as a treat, we reserved a table at Winder Hall across from the Wheatsheaf, a part-Tudor country house hotel that specialises in slow-cooked organic food. With excellent walks in this area, especially to Spout



The Vikings introduced some particularly hardy species of sheep to the Lake District

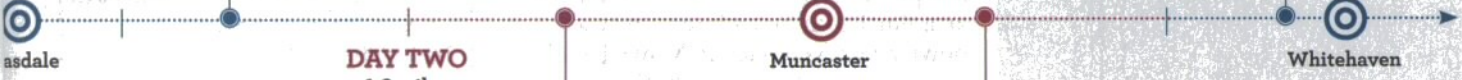


Sheep saunter down the road at West Water. On the far shore, the Screes rise to 2000 feet



**DAY ONE WASDALE HEAD**  
The road ends here, but it's only the beginning for climbers. From here, they can begin their attempts at climbing Great Gable, Scafell Pike, Pillar, Kirkfell, Lingmell and other mountains

**DAY ONE**  
13.5 miles



**DAY TWO**  
1.6 miles

**DAY THREE**  
19.1 miles



**DAY THREE WHITEHAVEN**  
The port flourished in the 17th century, leaving a rich Georgian architectural legacy. The recent harbour rejuvenation has cost around £11.3m, and the Beacon museum there is terrific



**DAY TWO MUNCASTER CASTLE**  
This overlooks the Esk estuary and sits about a mile south of the coastal town of Ravenglass, where the mountains of the Lake District National Park meet the sea. The castle remains a family home and is said to be haunted

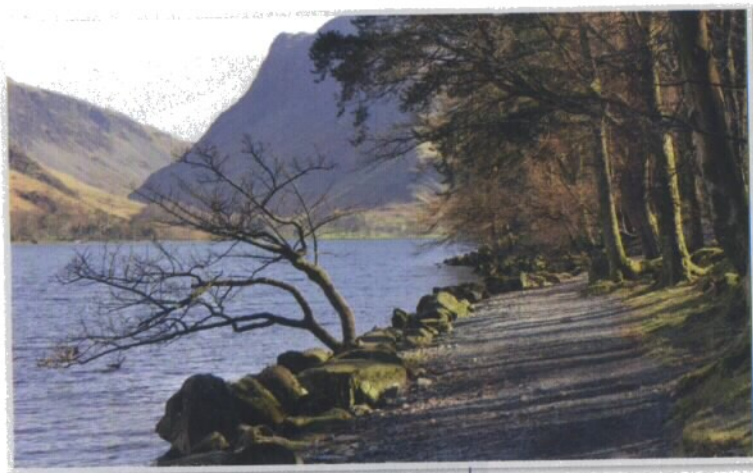


**DAY TWO RAVENGLASS AND ESKDALE RAILWAY**  
This carries you into Eskdale through glorious scenery in 'breath-of-fresh-air' open carriages. There are also open-sided ones for bicycles and cosy covered saloons



## SHORT TOUR The Lake District

# HIGHLIGHTS



**DAY FOUR  
BUTTERMERE**  
There is a path around the lake. It's about 4.5 miles (7.2 km) long, and at one point runs through a rock tunnel beneath the hamlet of Hasness. The scenery is wonderful every step of the way

**DAY FOUR**  
18.4 miles



Low Lorton

**DAY FIVE**  
19.6 miles



Keswick

### DAY FIVE KESWICK

Keswick boasts plenty of outdoor shops, but there's more to it than that. There's the Saturday market around the Moot Hall on the Market Square and plenty of museums not too far away. It makes a great stop on a wet day



Force waterfall, you can easily work up a big appetite before dinner.

Next day dawned sunny and bright. We dawdled in the Lorton area, with its five lakes and two market towns (Keswick and Cockermouth), yet we still had time to discover Loweswater and the Kisktile Inn, which has its own micro-brewery.

Then we took a three-hour walk around Buttermere, with stunning scenery, dairy

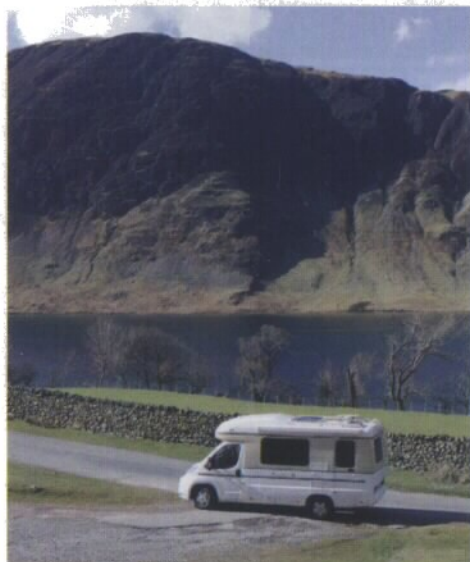
ice creams at the half-way point, and a coffee and cake shop at the finish.

Nerves steadied, we made the alpine climb over the Honister Pass. At 1167ft (356m), it's one of the highest in the region and also one of the steepest, with gradients of up to 1 in 4 (25%). We then descended into the Borrowdale Valley, from where the River Derwent flows into Derwent Water, and on to our final destination, Castlerigg Hall Caravan and Camping Park at Keswick, overlooked by the Catbells, Skiddaw and Walla Crag.

The site was ideal - it offered views of Derwentwater and Bassenthwaite. It had 250 pitches, free Wi-Fi, shops and even an animal farm for children. The walk down an uneven track to Keswick took an hour, but we got a taxi back.

Keswick has lots of rainy-day attractions, including The Cumberland Pencil Museum, the Theatre by the Lake and the Cars of the Stars motor museum. However, its big draw is as a major activity centre, with climbing and outdoor shops galore. We heard that rain is like sunshine to the locals.

Still, if you're kitted out properly, it doesn't matter what the weather is in this unique region - it's almost like being far away from Britain, maybe even in the Southern Alps of New Zealand.



**Crummock Water** is owned by the National Trust. Mellbreak soars majestically behind

## TOUR ESSENTIALS

### **P** Motorhome parking

Parking is a mixture of council-run and private areas. For more information, see [www.motorhomeparking.co.uk](http://www.motorhomeparking.co.uk).

**Driving in Cumbria** Sat nav can take you over passes that may not be suitable for your 'van, so road maps and map-reading skills are essential. Look out for width restrictions and plan routes in advance with OS maps.

### **W** Our sites

#### **National Trust Wasdale Campsite**

Wasdale Head Hall Farm, Wasdale Head, Seascale, Cumbria CA20 1EX  
Tel 01539 463 862  
[www.nationaltrust.org.uk](http://www.nationaltrust.org.uk)

#### **Ravenglass C&CC site**

Ravenglass, Cumbria, CA18 1SR  
Tel 01229 717 250  
[www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk](http://www.campingandcaravanningclub.co.uk)

#### **The Wheatsheaf Inn**

Low Lorton, Cumbria CA13 9UW  
Tel 0190 085 199  
[www.wheatsheafinnlorton.co.uk](http://www.wheatsheafinnlorton.co.uk)

#### **Castlerigg Hall Caravan and Camping Park**

Keswick, Cumbria, CA12 4TE  
Tel 01768 774 499  
[www.castlerigg.co.uk](http://www.castlerigg.co.uk)

### **W** Food and drink

#### **Wasdale Head Inn**

The only hotel in Wasdale valley is a great walkers' pub. Excellent real ales and food. Wasdale Head, near Gosforth, Cumbria CA20 1EX  
Tel 01946 726 229  
[www.wasdale.com](http://www.wasdale.com)

### **D** Dates for your diary

#### **Muncaster Castle Summer of Fun**

**August 1-31, 2011**  
As well as all Muncaster's usual attractions, a Muncaster Fool or jester will perform daily. Entertainment includes circus skills workshops and magic shows.  
Tel 01229 717 614  
[www.muncaster.co.uk](http://www.muncaster.co.uk)

#### **Rosehill and Lake District Summer Music**

**August 8-10, 2011**  
String workshops with musical training for all ages and abilities. Coaching by specialists, as well as musical activities and games.  
Tel 01946 692 422  
[www.rosehilltheatre.co.uk](http://www.rosehilltheatre.co.uk)

### **£** Costs

Fuel Cost.....	£124
Site fees.....	£90
Food.....	£90
<b>TOTAL TOUR COST .....</b>	<b>£304</b>