



Viewpoint

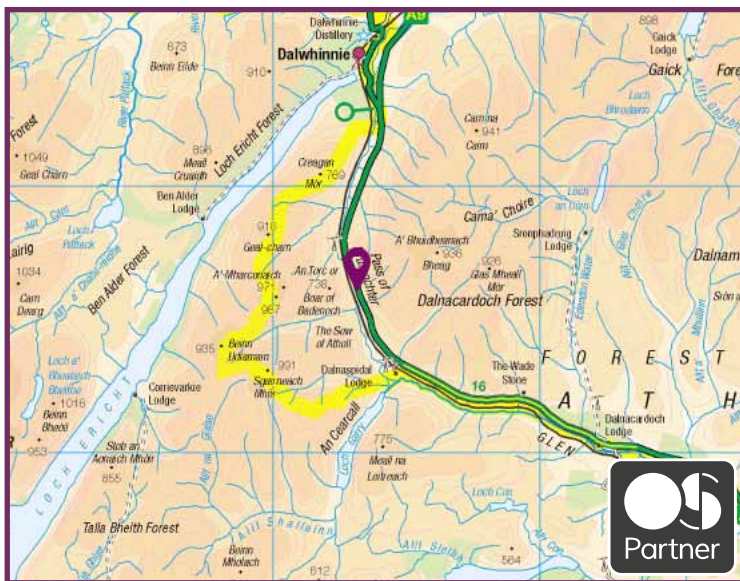
Ice road



Time: 15 mins

Region: Scotland

Landscape: rural



Location: Drumochter Pass, A9, Dalwhinnie, Highlands, PH19 1AE

Grid reference: NN 63114 76055

Directions: Park in layby 81 on the A9, on the Perthshire / Inverness-shire border, just past the 'Welcome to the Highlands' sign.

Keep an eye out for: The snow gates lower down the A9 at Dalnacardoch. Owing to its height Drumochter Pass is regularly closed by winter snowstorms. The gates are to stop foolish drivers attempting to cross the Pass and getting stuck in snowdrifts!

Taking up over half the land area of Scotland, the Grampian Mountains are a mighty natural barrier that separates the Northern Highlands from Scotland's central belt. To connect the key cities of Edinburgh and Inverness both the A9 and the Highland Railway had to find a way through this massive chain.

Several passes provide through-routes and you'd think road and railway would take the shortest, but this is not the case.

If you are driving north, by the time you've reached this viewpoint, the road has taken a long loop west and is about to curve back east. We are now at the 460 metre-high Drumochter Pass.

Why do the road and railway make such a high detour to cross the Grampian Mountains?



On paper Drumochter Pass may seem like a strange place to cross the Grampian Mountains. It involves quite a detour from the obvious straight line that runs between Edinburgh and Inverness. There are two shorter passes to the east. The Gaick Pass is 5.5 miles shorter while the Minigaig Pass is a whole 15 miles shorter. Unfortunately neither are particularly safe alternatives.

The Gaick has one major problem. The clue is in the name. 'Gaick' is Gaelic for 'cleft', and refers to the central section where the route runs through a narrow mountain corridor notorious for avalanches. Although it is only 30 metres higher than Drumochter, travellers have been killed here. In a famous 1800 incident known as the Loss of Gaick, a bothy (hut) with five people inside was buried beneath several feet of snow.

As for the Minigaig Pass, there's nothing 'mini' about it. The name probably comes from the Gaelic 'Moine', meaning 'moss'. The route climbs to 825 metres on bleak moors that are snowbound all winter.

Despite the big detour, Drumochter Pass is wider, safer and more practicable as a through-route. Just look at how the relatively gentle ground we are standing on contrasts with the mountains that rise like walls to either side of us. This is all thanks to a lot of ice!

During the peak of the last Ice Age (around 18,000 years ago) Scotland was covered by ice, with glaciers in places up to 4,000 feet thick. Drumochter Pass was scoured out by one such great glacier, which pushed through the mountains and left behind a flat-bottomed trench.

A road runs through it

Many millennia later this trench offered a much more attractive routeway through the range. The first road was built here by General George Wade in the 1720s. The road was one of several he was tasked to build in the Highlands following clan rebellions aimed at restoring the exiled King James to the throne. A new road network was required to aid the deployment of government troops.

General Wade's road was little more than a rough track. It would be another century before the road was improved by engineer Thomas Telford. To pay for the work, travellers were charged a much-hated toll. Northern cattle drovers, who needed to cross the Grampians to take their herds to southern markets, were so infuriated that they resorted to old drove roads such as the Minigaig instead. The surface of the moor was also kinder on the cattle's feet than the rough pre-tarmac road. Today's travellers have the Roads and Bridges Act of 1878 to thank for the removal of the toll.

On the west side of the road the Highland Railway from Edinburgh to Inverness also takes advantage of the flat-bottomed Drumochter Pass to cross the Grampians, reaching the highest point in the British rail network at 452 metres.

We take the railway's existence for granted today, but when the line was proposed in the 1860s the prospect of a steam train roaring through the Highlands triggered one of the country's first great environmental debates.

Even today environmental issues continue to plague Drumochter. The latest concerns the recent upgrading of the electricity power line that you can see running parallel to the road on its east side. Conservation bodies objected to the erection of the huge, visually intrusive pylons, each 42-65 metres tall, but all alternative options were considered too expensive. What do you think of these industrial-age intrusions into the pristine heart of the Grampian Mountains? Progress or desecration?

Viewpoint created by Ralph Storer. Ralph is a writer and photographer with a passion for the Scottish Highlands. His publications include the best-selling series *The Ultimate Guide to the Munros*, available online or from Luath Press Limited.