Before you go

No public body gives a distance or a time for this walk. By our map it is about 17.6 km (11 miles) there and back with about 900 metres of climb, and takes about 6 to 7 hours, more with stops, in poor weather or under snow: leave plenty of daylight for the way down. Under snow it is a winter mountain, for walkers with winter skills and the equipment for them. Wherever snow lies there will be cornices on the corrie edge, which are not solid ground, Mountaineering Scotland warns, and cornice collapses have been recorded on Lochnagar. No avalanche hazard is issued outside the winter season, which is no sign there is no risk.

Check the mountain forecast, and under snow the snow and avalanche conditions too. Wear good boots and carry warm, waterproof clothing, plenty of food and drink, and a torch. Carry a map and compass and know how to use them, and do not rely only on a phone or GPS: signal is patchy at best. Leave word of where you are going and when you will be back. Keep a dog on a short lead or close at heel, above all from April to August. Stags may be stalked at any time of year, busiest in the first three weeks of October, and hinds from 21 October to 15 February: keep to the main path.

From Ballater, cross the River Dee and turn right, then follow the signed single-track road into Glen Muick to the car park where the public road ends. There is no public transport. The car park charges a fee and fills early on summer weekends, so arrive early. The visitor centre beside it shows the day's forecast.

After the walk

Many walkers come down by the Glas Allt path and Loch Muick. This walk goes back the way it came, by the Ladder, with care.

The walk online, with its film and map:
hiddenscotland.com/walks/lochnagar-from-the-spittal-of-glen-muick

It starts at the car park at the Spittal of Glen Muick, where the public road up the glen ends, NO 309 851.

In an emergency, call 999 and ask for the service you need, mountain rescue among them. Give a six-figure grid reference if you can, who is hurt and how, and your phone number.

A MUNRO WALK UP

Lochnagar



A HIDDEN SCOTLAND WALK

By the Ladder

Lochnagar is the great hill of Royal Deeside, 1,155 metres above Balmoral in the Cairngorms National Park. This is the usual way up from the Spittal of Glen Muick: across the glen, up a track and a path to the col below Meikle Pap, up the Ladder and along the ridge to Cac Carn Beag, and back the same way. The last few metres are a short scramble over boulders, and there are no waymarks: a day for walkers who can find their way with a map and compass.

words // Hidden Scotland

The track runs past the rangers' visitor centre and across the flat glen floor, over the River Muick by a bridge. At Allt-na-giubhsaich, a house among the pines, the way is signed for Lochnagar, and a path through the trees leads to the hill track. The track crosses the Allt na Giubhsaich on stepping stones, by our map: after heavy rain the burn can run high, so if the crossing looks unsafe, turn back. About 4.4 km up, a large cairn marks where the path leaves the track on the left. Keep to the path: the track goes on over the col.

The path crosses a field of boulders and climbs in zig-zags to the col below Meikle Pap, where the corrie opens up, its cliffs ringing a dark loch far below. Then comes the Ladder, a steep, rough staircase of stone slabs through big granite boulders, within 10 to 30 metres of the corrie's cliffs by our map: watch every step and keep to the path, well back from the drop. On the plateau keep right where the Glas Allt path joins from the left, past the cairn on Cac Carn Mor, also within about 30 metres of the cliffs, to Cac Carn Beag.

In cloud the plateau is featureless and the corrie edge hard to see: keep well away from the edge, and if the cloud is coming down, the wind is rising or anyone is tiring, turn back. The summit is a granite tor, reached by a short scramble over boulders, hands on the rock: in wind, wet or ice, leave it alone. Go back the way you came, keeping left where the Glas Allt path goes off, and go down the Ladder with care.



Up Lochnagar by the Ladder and back the same way: about 6 to 7 hours.

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