Before you go

No public body gives a distance or a time for this way: the ski centre publishes only a walk down from the top of its chairlift. By our map it is about 6.5 km (4 miles) there and back with about 330 metres of climb, and it takes about 2 to 3 hours, more with stops, in poor weather or under snow. Under snow it is a winter mountain: go only with winter gear, an ice axe and crampons and the skill to use them. The Scottish Avalanche Information Service names the Cairnwell and Glas Maol ranges in its Southern Cairngorms area: read that forecast.

Check the mountain forecast. Wear sturdy footwear and carry waterproof and warm layers, water and food. Carry a map and compass and know how to use them: the ski centre asks walkers to have a backup means of navigation at all times. In the ski season the hill is a working ski area. Keep outside the snow fences and managed areas, never walk up a tow line, running or not, and ask the hill staff or ski patrol if unsure. No dogs but search and rescue dogs on the managed areas, and dogs close and on a lead through the centre. Walking can be dangerous, the centre says, and all walkers must take responsibility for their own safety.

The Glenshee Snowsports Centre's car park is on the A93 at the Cairnwell Pass, sat nav AB35 5XU: free for the first 50 minutes or with a chairlift ticket, then £4 for the day, the centre's page says. The centre has toilets and washrooms by its buildings, across the road from the car park. The A93 has snow gates at the Spittal of Glenshee and at Braemar.

After the walk

Carn Aosda, about 2 km to the north, and Carn a' Gheoidh, about 3 km to the west, are Munros too, and many walkers climb all three in one round: this walk keeps to The Cairnwell. Some guides go straight down the open slopes to the centre or the road; this walk keeps to the tracks.

The walk online, with its film and map:
hiddenscotland.com/walks/the-cairnwell-from-the-glenshee-ski-centre

It starts at the Glenshee ski centre car park on the A93 at the Cairnwell Pass, NO 139 780.

In an emergency, call 999 or 112 and ask for Police and Mountain Rescue, Mountaineering Scotland says, and give your location as exactly as you can, ideally a six-figure grid reference and a named feature. Do not rely only on a phone or GPS.

A MUNRO WALK UP

The Cairnwell



A HIDDEN SCOTLAND WALK

From the Glenshee ski centre

The Cairnwell is 933 metres, a Munro beside the A93 at the Glenshee ski centre in the Cairngorms National Park, with masts on its top and a ski area on its slopes. This is its usual way on its own: across the road and up the ski area's tracks to the col above Loch Vrotachan, then along the north-west ridge to the summit, and back. It is a short Munro, but still a mountain, where mist and winter come in fast: for hillwalkers who can find their way with a map and compass.

words // Hidden Scotland

From the car park cross the A93 with care to the back of the ski centre's buildings and take the bulldozed track west behind them. It crosses a burn on a small bridge and climbs past the tows and the Cairnwell Café, open only in the ski season, with snow fences close beside it. By our map it crosses the lines of two ski tows: keep outside the snow fences and off every tow line. About 900 metres out the track forks. Keep left, along the side of the hill, for the col between Carn Aosda and The Cairnwell; the right fork climbs steeply towards Carn Aosda.

The track reaches the col above Loch Vrotachan about 1.7 km out, by a moorland information sign. Turn left, south-east, onto the track up the north-west ridge. In mist this is the junction to find again on the way down. The track climbs the broad ridge beside snow fences, the steep slopes of Coire Dirich falling away on the right, rises over a shoulder, dips about 15 metres and climbs on past stone walls to the top of the Cairnwell chairlift, about 3.1 km out.

The chairlift stops short of the summit. From its top the last of the way is a steep and rocky hill path of about 190 metres to the masts. The top is crowded with masts, huts and a weather station: keep well away from the masts and follow any notice or the instructions of the workers on site. Go down the way you came, turning right at the information sign on the col for the ski centre. In mist the tracks, fences and lift lines run every way: if the cloud comes down, turn back by the way you came.



Up The Cairnwell from the Glenshee ski centre and back the same way: about 2 to 3 hours.

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