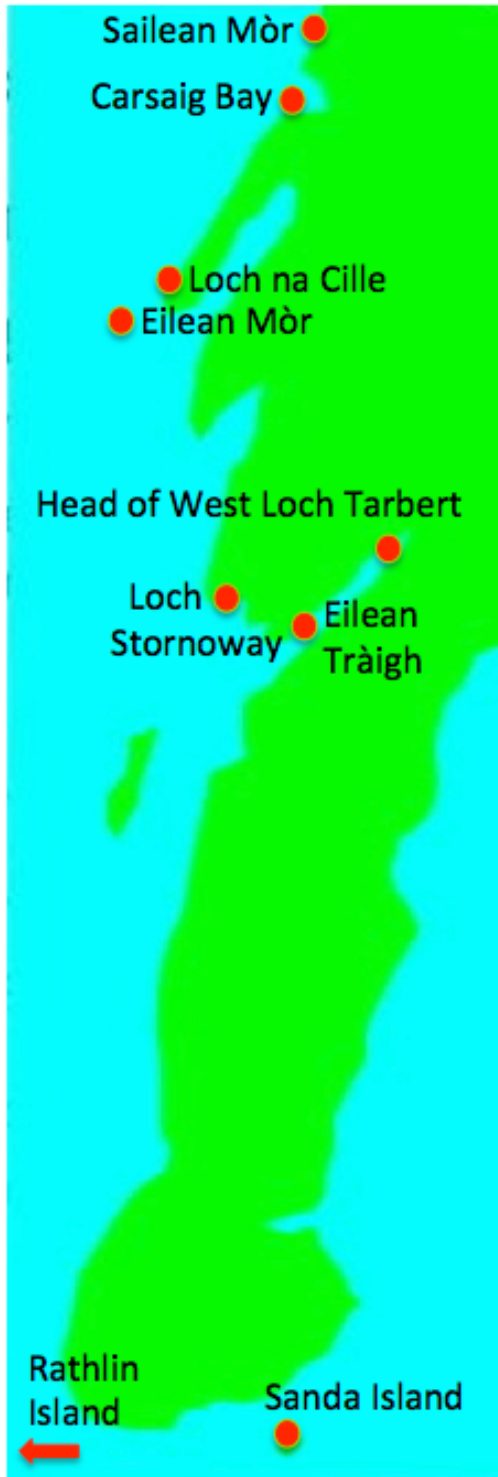


Kintyre

Last updated January 10th 2024



Kintyre, known as Cantyre until at least the 1930s, is almost an island. It is the long droopy-down bit of Scotland that separates the Clyde from the west coast proper. In fact it is so droopy that legend has it that it was once the benchmark for how erect a penis could become before being banned on BBC television (i.e. hardly at all). The Mull of Kintyre, the pointy end bit, became very well known as the Paul McCartney and Denny Laine 1970s song. The west side of Kintyre, which is what we are concerned with here, is of course exposed to the south and west but there are some convenient lochs to escape into, as well as shelter by the lovely island of Gigha. And Northern Ireland is only 11 nautical miles away, across the strong tides of the North Channel.

Carsaig Bay

There are several anchorages around the islands off the bay, and a not very good one in the bay itself. None are within particularly easy reach of Carsaig. Not that there is a lot to see and do there. In fact it is rather suburban with a scattering of mostly modern houses, and a static caravan site. There really is nothing of great interest, apart from a reasonably atmospheric cemetery in the middle of which is a very uncared for and doorless enclosure to one of the Campbell families. The slightly crumbling jetty is apparently a Telford. If you are energetic enough, and feel the need for some milk or dinner out, you could walk the near mile to Tayvallich (see Loch Sween).

On the whole I think it is best just to explore around the islands in the dinghy. If you do go ashore there is lovely typically Argyll countryside to wander around, festooned with primroses and celandine in the spring, with the calls of cuckoos. For example, land at Aoran nam Buth, the bay to the southeast of Eilean Dubh, walk uphill to the east to find a surprisingly large ruined farmstead at Barnashaig, and above that Dùn Bhronaig overlooking a small lochan.

Eilean Mòr (MacCormick Islands with various alternative spellings)

This tiny and most Hebridean of islands¹ is now owned and looked after by the Eilean Mòr MacCormick Trust² (the island was bequeathed to the Scottish National party in 1978). The Trust has restored the jetty (nicely) and built a small stone house with over-large windows and a turfed roof (not so nicely). They have also provided useful information for visitors (many of whom come by RIBs from Loch Sween).

Half way up to the summit is the fairly well preserved ruin of St Cormaigh's Chapel, a 13th century structure with the later addition of the chancel vaulting in the 14th century, and even later a fireplace for some kind of domestic conversion³. Eventually it was said to have been used as an illicit still. Be all that as it may, it's a serene spot with the view of the Paps of Jura across the sound of Jura, and in the south just a glimpse of Ireland from where the early Christian monks came. A recumbent and decaying monument is tucked into the south wall of the chancel, perhaps listening to the seagull cries and sparrow chirpings as there is nothing much else than the birdsong to break the silence of this holy and ancient place. And in the early summer, if you stand and listen carefully, you may hear the characteristic squeaky sound of the corncrake, one of our rarest birds. The crumbling remains of a cross in the graveyard is said to be 10th century. The cross on the summit of the island is a replica of a 14th century cross now in the National Museum of Scotland, but it is striking nonetheless.

Just to the east of the chapel, about 50 metres, is a well which is presumably why this particular island was colonised in the first place. Now it's a useful place to get the salt out of your hair.

On the east-facing slope of the highest point you will find a rather dank cave which is difficult to get into, and even more difficult to get out of. Take a rope and torch! This is apparently where 8th century monks liked to meditate away from it all. The two rudely carved crosses on the wall are said to be from the same period. Perhaps even St Cormac himself meditated here, an Irish contemporary of St Columba, but this is a bit unlikely.

Eilean Tràigh, West Loch Tarbert

This is a pretty spot, quiet too although beware the wash from the Islay ferries. Well worth getting off the boat for a stroll by the oak woods a little way towards the head of the loch. There was clearly a ferry here once (hence Ferry House marked on the OS map) and there are still the remains of a jetty. A little further on, before getting to the road, look left to see the rather astonishing Ardpatrik House set amongst overgrown gardens, late 18th century with some unfortunate alterations and additions, including the rather incongruous 19th century porch. It doesn't look very inhabited but maybe someone is lurking in there somewhere. I guess this estate should be owned by someone with enough money to restore it to its original glory, so with loads of money. A rock star maybe, or a footballer, or even a banker. Some of the estate cottages have been up for sale, as well as building plots, so there is something going on.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eilean_M%C3%B2r,_MacCormaig_Isles

² <https://eileanmormaccormick.weebly.com/trust.html>

³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38634/eilean-mor-st-cormacs-chapel-and-burial-ground>

Head of West Loch Tarbert

Why would anyone want to sail all the way up to the head of this loch, just to tack (probably) back down it again? Well, it is very pretty to start off with. There are lots of deciduous woods hiding well-planted conifer plantations, and neat fields stretching down to the water's edge. At the head of the loch, right up at the end, there is a rather charming if somewhat beaten-up pier with some rusting hulks (four in a watery graveyard at my last count), lots of wild flowers, and usually no other visiting yacht to disturb the peace.

This is the tradesman's entrance to the village of Tarbert⁴, half-an-hour walk up quite a busy road. As early as the 18th century there was a plan to dig a canal here across the narrow isthmus to connect the west coast with the Clyde, so avoiding the perils of the Mull of Cantyre as it was then called. But there was never enough money, and eventually the connection was made a few miles further north at Crinan (although longer, a much better bet than having to get out of West Loch Tarbert in a southwesterly gale). If you are that keen, drag your boat across to the village like the Vikings did, hence the Gaelic name of 'Tairbeart' meaning isthmus or portage point.

There are plenty of Clyde yachts around in Tarbert marina, quite an eclectic bunch actually with some nice classics, but the village is not wildly interesting. The outdoor gym by the marina is a good place to get rid of children for an hour or two. The marina itself is excellent with superb toilets and friendly staff. The harbour wall is a 'Telford', so a touch of quality to make up for some truly awful late 20th century architecture. Wander up to inspect, but not enter, the remains of the ruined, mostly late 15th century castle⁵. The castle itself looks much better from afar than close to because part of the stabilisation is with inappropriate brick, and there is a very shouty modern carved stone panel fixed to the southeast outer wall. However, the view down to the harbour is delightful.

Tarbert has a butcher, a very good ironmonger, a small chandlery in the marina, a book shop/crafty sort of place (the Loch Fyne Gallery), and a Co-op supermarket. Next to where the Portavadie ferry comes in, you will find Prentice Seafoods with a wonderful selection of shellfish, so well worth checking out. Apropos Portavadie, you could take the ferry across to the modern marina⁶ built in the huge hole originally dug in the 1970s for an oilrig construction yard, but never used. There to enjoy some of their astonishing facilities — an excellent restaurant with friendly staff, a leisure centre and spa boasting among other things an infinity pool in which to wallow while the rain pours down on your bare head. And even a hair-straightener in the men's toilet. Once you could wander up the road to the abandoned, concrete and graffiti-strewn village of Polphail built to house the 500 oilrig workers who were never employed and never arrived. Most atmospheric but now flattened to make way for a distillery planned for the site.

The best place to get a good meal in Tarbert is at Starfish⁷, excellent seafood and very cheerful and friendly (you can tell the last from their website) but possibly now closed (ph 01880 820733). But then I have not tried the Galley Café in Harbour Street which sounds good (ph

⁴ <http://www.tarbertlochfyne.com/index.php>

⁵ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/39316/tarbert-tarbert-castle>

⁶ <https://www.portavadie.com/>

⁷ <https://www.starfishtarbert.com/>

01880 820090). The pubs do not seriously beckon, and there is no real ale to be had anywhere (tried that, no demand, I was told). The Café Ca'Dora does the usual business.

As well as the well-established Scottish Series⁸ for people who like to race (and shout loudly at each other), the Tarbert Traditional Boat Festival⁹ has been relaunched for those of a more contemplative nature (but it may have gone into hibernation again).

So not really an anchorage to dally in, but useful for crew changes as there is a bus from Tarbert to Glasgow. And the anchorage is a nice sheltered place to hang out.

Loch na Cille (Loch Keills)

Take the chance with a northerly wind to anchor below the 12th century chapel which has been beautifully restored, albeit as a quite dull box-like structure (which presumably it originally was)¹⁰. The roof is new, and inside there is a marvellous collection of medieval graveslabs now protected from the erosive Kintyre elements. They are very well described as well. The 8th century High Cross of Keills has also been moved in here — carved from Loch Sween stone, Iona school. Amazingly, the chapel is unlocked and long may it remain so.

It is well worth walking to the tip of Rubha na Cille, a narrow headland with fantastic views across to Jura with a distant glimpse of Ireland as well. Also the terrain is unusual because of the spiky rocks which are great for a touch of what I am told is now called bouldering (but it is a long way to bring your mat).

Loch Stornoway

I reckon it must be a bit of a struggle landing the dinghy on this wide-open sandy bay so I haven't tried yet. However, there are a few things to see — a fairly standard Church of Scotland Parish Church, and a fairly standard burial ground on the east bank of the burn which provides a rather delightful musical backdrop for the gravestones.

Kilberry church¹¹ was built in 1821, it is nicely painted outside but was rather forlorn inside until it was repainted in 2012. Before redecoration there was an abandoned 1902 Gaelic Bible on a windowsill in the gallery, removed now but still lurking in the pulpit along with an 1862 Self-Interpreting Bible. The upper windows in the south front are 'blind' which adds architectural elegance but not interior light. One does wonder for how long these charming buildings will be used as the local permanent population becomes more secular, drifting away to be replaced with holiday homeowners, and indeed how long it will be before the churches fall down or are converted into private homes (as many have been already). The divisions in the church about such matters as gay ministers and gay marriage can't be helping. However, this particular church still seems to thrive with services on two Sundays a month.

⁸ <https://www.scottishseries.co.uk/>

⁹ <http://www.tarbertfestivals.co.uk/festival-traditional-boat.php>

¹⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38654/keills-chapel-and-graveyard>

¹¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38998/carse-kilberry-parish-church>

There are three standing stones in a field just before the road — mysterious, lined up north-south. I imagine they at least will outlast the church, they have certainly been standing for very much longer.

I think you would have to be a very zealous foodie to make the four-mile trek to the Kilberry Inn¹², but by all accounts it would be worth the effort. I suppose if you phoned they might come and get you, and more importantly take you back later leaving you with the problem of getting into the dinghy in a swell and back to the boat (ph 01880 770223).

Rathlin Island

Yes I know, I know, Rathlin¹³ is part of Ireland not Scotland but it's near enough, and such a lovely place should not be missed out, so convenient for stopping off when rounding the Mull of Kintyre. In the not so far off days you just tied up in the inner harbour next to the lovely Georgian manor house, but now there are pontoons where you are surrounded by eider ducks, with seals very nearby (you will need the Irish Cruising Club Sailing Directions, the Clyde Cruising Club Directions only cover Scotland).

Rathlin is definitely a place to have a walk, and not just around the harbour but to one or more of the three lighthouses (three on such a small island must say something about the tides round here). The main seabird-nesting cliff is at the west end of the island, the kingdom of the RSPB¹⁴, about four miles.

Around 140 people live on the island. The houses are almost all fairly recent but here and there you will find some old cottages. The manor house belongs to the National Trust, but maybe no longer, has been refurbished, and is run as a guesthouse¹⁵, with a restaurant too but not every evening (ph 028 207 60046). Beside it is a restored barn and above that the remains of a walled garden. Along the road a bit there is a handy play park; an outdoor gym; an unpromising-looking pub/café — McCuaig's Bar¹⁶ — but actually it does good pub grub, Guinness too, and is friendly (0208 20760011); a small visitor centre and museum in the old boathouse; and a gift sort of a shop. The community¹⁷ runs a small provisions shop, or maybe it is a Co-op, in the manor house itself but this must suffer from the ease with which the local population can take the fast ferry over to Ballycastle with its much bigger shops.

Along the foreshore is St Thomas¹⁸, a pretty church built in the early 19th century, light and airy, along with its graveyard with a view. The Roman Catholic church up the lane above it is quite plain, but has some attractive stations of the cross.

Rathlin was where the first commercial wireless telegraph link was established in 1898, by Marconi, to Ballycastle. And those old enough, will remember that Rathlin suddenly became world famous in 1987 when Richard Branson, one of the only businessmen you have ever heard of, crash-landed his hot air balloon after his record breaking crossing of the Atlantic.

¹² <https://www.kilberryinn.com/>

¹³ <http://www.rathlincommunity.org/>

¹⁴ <https://www.rspb.org.uk/reserves-and-events/reserves-a-z/rathlin-island>

¹⁵ <http://www.manorhouserathlin.com/>

¹⁶ <https://www.facebook.com/Mc-Cuaigs-Bar-1562092597376209/>

¹⁷ <http://rathlincommunity.org/>

¹⁸ <http://www.ballintoy.connor.anglican.org/rathlin%20church.html>

Finally, why the cardinal buoy in Church Bay? It marks the wreck of HMS Drake¹⁹, a first world war armoured cruiser. She was coming back from Atlantic convoy duty when she was torpedoed off the North Irish coast by a German U-boat that got lucky. She managed to limp into the bay, hitting a merchant ship on the way, and then get off all her surviving crew before turning over and sinking — only 18 crew died.

Sailean Mòr

Not a place to be when there is any wind north of west, but pleasant enough otherwise on passage through the Sound of Jura. There is a Land Rover track just above the shore which connects Tayvallich with Crinan. It does not make a particularly inspiring walk, largely because the views are mostly obstructed by trees, at least within half-a-mile or so either way from the anchorage. No longer can you go ashore, like Capt. Harvey in the 1930s, to *"the crofters to get fresh milk and eggs"*²⁰. There is a wooden walkway leading through the trees to cup and ring markings, to the north, maybe in a mile or so

Sanda Island

What changes there have been here. The pub was once the thing to see and do on Sanda Island²¹, as well as the obvious walks and views. Where once there had been a community of maybe a hundred people, by 2010 there were just three — Charles and Wendy McVey and their toddler. They had come back to run the pub (and the restaurant, the holiday lets, the fire service, the post, and 300 sheep) for the new owners of the island, Michi Meier and Berna Civeleker. Charles and Wendy must have known what they were doing having done the same job for Dick Gannon, albeit at a time when they didn't have to think about how to get their child to nursery across the Sound of Sanda. Previously the island had been owned by this Mr Gannon, an irascible Englishman by all accounts, but who commendably was responsible for restoring the old buildings by the pier (very nicely) and building the pub itself, although you wouldn't have thought it was 'new' to look at.

This pub must have outclassed the Old Forge on Knoydart as the most remote pub in the UK, there is not even a scheduled ferry service. The pub's name was interesting — the Byron Darnton Tavern. This was the name of the Liberty ship which foundered off the island in 1946 while taking American servicemen and their families back to the US after the war. The ship's name was derived from a renowned American war correspondent who had been accidentally killed by a bomb dropped by an American plane. The pub sort of reopened in 2011 as the Sanda Island Hotel and Restaurant, a supposedly up-market establishment, with four moorings. However, the website in 2013 made no mention of any hotel, ominously just that Sanda was "A tranquil private island". And guess what, in 2014 the new owners tried to close it all off to the public which was perhaps in their minds when they bought the island. But do not be put off, you have a legal right to roam in Scotland as long as you don't get too near the owner's residence. This means not using the pier which "is in front of the living room of the house" according to the owner and now adorned with a Strictly Private sign. So what, pull the

¹⁹ <https://www.wessexarch.co.uk/our-work/hms-drake-rathlin-island>

²⁰ Sailing Orders. Practical instruction to yachtsman, illustrated by the author's cruises on the West Coast of Scotland. Capt J R Harvey, Alexander Maclehose, London 1935.

²¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sanda_Island

dinghy up on the beach and go for a walk. Apparently the island's water supply has now been condemned by the local water authority, so what that means for anyone who plans to live here I know not.

By 2015 the whole place looked dead. There was no one to be seen anywhere on the island, the pub buildings were all closed up and deteriorating. Notwithstanding news reports that the island could be rented for £2000 a day!

Along by the boathouse (conspic. and crucial for entry without a chartplotter) you will find St Ninian's late medieval chapel (remains of) along with a very weathered slab and cross²². This is where Charles and Wendy got married, certainly an original venue. The boathouse was once the base for the Sanda Island Bird Observatory, defunct since 2013, and by 2015 the building itself was reduced to a wreck, thanks to the uncaring island owners presumably. Incredible that we let foreigners buy beautiful Scottish islands and then leave them to rot.

It is definitely worth the 20-30 minute walk across to the lighthouse, Stevenson again, 1850. It is set on a most spectacular outcrop right next to a natural arch, with the tide swirling all around, and a bit of the Byron Darnton still visible at low water. The lighthouse cottages look derelict. Sad.

²² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38698/sanda-island-st-ninians-chapel>