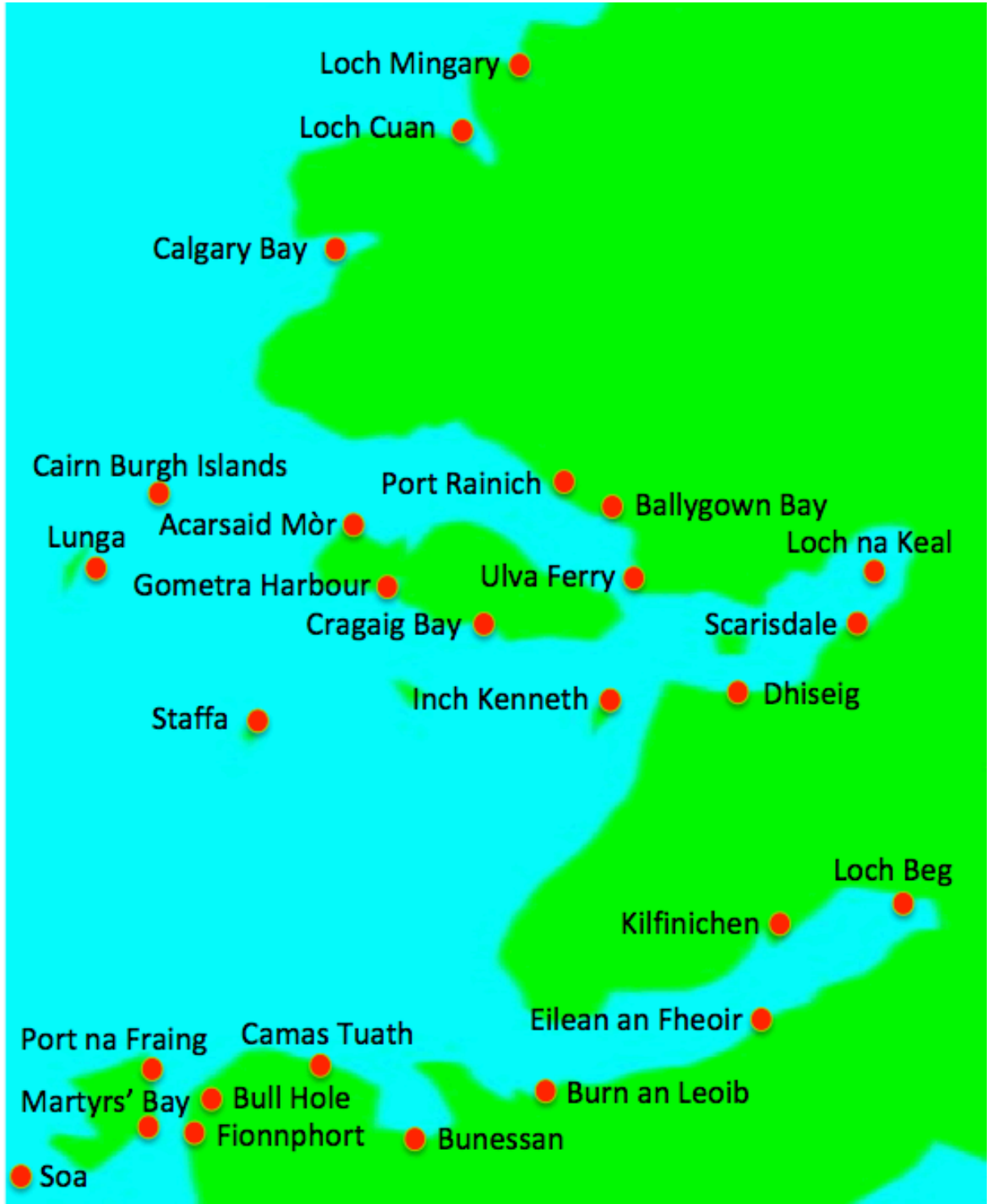


West Mull

Last updated 1st February 2024



Dramatic has got to be the best adjective to describe the west coast of Mull along with the nearby islands of Staffa, Iona, Ulva, Gometra, and the Treshnish. Volcanic would be another adjective that comes to mind, hence the strange, distorted but such recognisable shapes as Staffa and the Dutchman's cap.

As ever there is a range of anchorages from the completely safe such as Bunessan to the somewhat dodgy such as Lunga, to the definitely don't stay there long at Staffa. Out here you are more exposed than in many other parts of the Inner Hebrides, but there are always snug anchorages to run to.

Acarsaid Mòr (Gometra) (big harbour)

This northern harbour on Gometra has the same things to see and do as Gometra harbour below, just in the reverse direction.

The Bull Hole

I must confess that for decades I only ever anchored here for overnight stays when visiting Iona. I had never got off the boat until 2017. A mistake. Inflate the dinghy and head for the ruined stone pier with a lovely small sandy beach behind it. Then take in the now more-or-less but maybe not quite abandoned Tòr Mòr quarry which was busy-busy in the 19th century. The pink granite was used for the Holborn Viaduct in London and the Liverpool Docks, as well as for the local Stevenson lighthouses. There are still huge blocks of stone piled in giant heaps, along with abandoned and rusting machinery, and a trio of restored cottages. Walk on along the Land Rover track through the quarry to Fionnphort (see below), for stores maybe, and the Ninth Wave restaurant. Stop at the viewpoint above the quarry to admire the scenery. Then head back along the rather vague and twisty coastal track.

Bun an Leuib

This is a handy and quiet anchorage in southerly winds if you don't fancy Bunessan which on the whole has not got a lot to offer. Great view too, to the north and northwest. Up on a small promontory on the east side of the bay you will find very obvious signs of some sort of defensive structure — Dun na Muirgheidh¹. It is a fine viewpoint, not surprisingly as presumably the fort was built here hundreds of years ago to spot enemies coming over the horizon, whoever they might have been.

Bunessan

This is of course a dead easy anchorage to get into and there is loads of space, definitely a refuge on a bad day. But watch out, there are a surprisingly large number of fishing boats using the pier, so show a riding light at night. It is a 15-minute walk into the village of Bunessan² but I fear it does not seem to have a lot going for it. Undistinguished houses, a not very special church, a shop, and the Argyll Arms Hotel³ which has a spectacularly awful flat-roof extension. But the hotel does harbour a restaurant (ph 01681 700240), a bar with fairly

¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22003/mull-dun-na-muirgheidh>

² <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/mull/bunessan/index.html>

³ <https://www.isle-of-mull.net/accommodation/hotels/the-argyll-arms-hotel/>

standard bar suppers, and real ale I believe (its Facebook page has had no posts since 2013). The Blackbird Bistro is getting great reviews, and a local friend rates it highly, so I must visit (ph 01681 700454) but it may be closed now — there seems to be no website or Facebook page.

The Ross of Mull Historical Centre — Tigh na Rois — was opened in 2009⁴. It is small, and mostly devoted to genealogy, staffed by very enthusiastic local ladies. The village was originally established as a fishing station in the late 18th century, like Tobermory, but it was unsuccessful.

You could walk along the road to the Ardalanish weavers⁵ from here, as easily as from the Rubh' Ardalanish anchorage —about the same distance, and you are less likely to get lost (see Southeast Mull).

Calgary Bay

It's a shame this anchorage is right in the face of the prevailing wind, with quite a lot of swell too. Not only is there a fabulous beach, albeit quite touristy, and an ancient walled burial ground — Cladh Mhuire — behind it, but there is something else worth a detour just up the hill. The combination of café, an always interesting art gallery, and a short woodland walk with sculptures which seem to vary from time to time, and are mostly made with dead wood from the local trees. Here and there are all sorts of little artistic touches, charming and interesting. So, from the northeast corner of the bay, walk up the track past some of the sculptures towards the old Calgary Farmhouse⁶ (definitely do not take the road). It is a lovely place to wander around, look at the art gallery, and have lunch in the café.

The remains of ruined cottages and an old pier can be seen on the north side of the bay, yet another reminder of the Highland Clearances. Although migrants no doubt left from here for the New World, the modern city of Calgary in Canada was not directly named after Calgary Bay. A Colonel Macleod from Skye, Commissioner of the Northwest Mounted Police, once stayed here on holiday. In 1876 he named one of his forts Calgary, a name which was retained when the city arose later in the same place.

Camas Tuath

No beach here, just a rather scenic inlet⁷ with a view, an alternative to Bunessan in southerly winds. It is in fact rather interesting because the quarry⁸ to port as you come in is where Alan Stevenson got the stones for his lighthouses on Ardnamurchan and Skerryvore. Imagine in the mid-19th century blasting the rocks out of here, hauling them down the hill (the remains of the slipway and marks of the rails are still there), getting them on to boats from the pier (which had to be built), and then out to sea. The ruined house by the pier must date from the same period. In passing, the granite walls in the quarry look pretty good for rock climbing — bring ropes and climbing shoes.

⁴ <https://romhc.org.uk/>

⁵ <https://ardalanish.com/>

⁶ <https://www.calgary.co.uk/>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Camas_Tuath

⁸ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/21756/mull-camas-tuath>

The well-restored and maintained buildings to starboard, originally built for the quarriers, and powered it seems by a wind turbine and solar panels, belong to the Iona Community⁹. There are indoor and outdoor activities for young people. Their mission statement was, and maybe still is: *"Together, we seek to enable growth in love, respect and awareness of ourselves, each other, God and the Environment"*. You have been alerted

Cairn Burgh Islands

Not an anchorage for the faint hearted, but with Antares Charts there is no problem, provided you watch the tides rushing through between Cairn na Burgh Mòr (rock of the big fort) and Cairn na Burgh Beg (rock of the wee fort). Best for a picnic stop on a hot day. The extraordinary thing about these very small and long-uninhabited islands is that you will find the remains of a 16th century ruined castle¹⁰ and an 18th century barracks on top of the biggest, and the remains of fortifications on the smallest (the first fortifications were probably 13th century). The castle was garrisoned at least until the 18th century. And check out the ruined, probably 15th century chapel. How crazy is all of that, given the difficulties of access and indeed of growing food (somewhere there must be a well for water)? But maybe not so crazy if you are defending yourself. Everything is now crumbling away, invaded by nettles. There are loads of seals around the anchorage, and loads of wild flowers too (sea campion etc.) but not much in the way of nesting seabirds I think.

Craigaig Bay

The Craigaig Bay anchorage on Ulva¹¹ has lots of interest. Behind the cottage there are a couple of not very distinguished standing stones. But walk east past the cottage along a Land Rover track, and then fork west back up the hill to take a high-level track westwards. There are spectacular views across the bay to the cliffs of Mull, Iona and the Treshnish Islands. All around you will stumble on the remains of derelict cottages hidden in the bracken — the population were turfed out in the 19th century. After a while you will find a graveyard down nearer the shore — Cill Mhic Eoghainn¹². This is very ruined and I guess in fifty years will be a complete wreck, overgrown with bracken, and forgotten. Sad when MacQuarries¹³ from far afield return to search out their ancestors who left this lovely island, starving and looking for a better life elsewhere. Lachlan MacQuarrie became the first Governor of New South Wales in 1810, and is now regarded as the father of Australia.

If you follow the Land Rover track, but east from the bay, look for the remains of an old water-mill. After a short distance the track follows the edge of a narrow inlet with evidence of old harbour walls and at the head of the inlet the track crosses a small burn. At this point the ruined mill-house is off the track to the left, a few metres. There is still an old millstone in the ruins.

Back on the boat you can take your dinghy and explore the small islands to the west of the anchorage where there are some tiny sandy beaches, grand for a fine summer's day. Or,

⁹ <https://iona.org.uk/island-centres/camas-the-outdoor-centre-with-a-difference/>

¹⁰ <http://portal.historicenvironment.scot/designation/SM12954>

¹¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulva>

¹² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/21781/ulva-cille-mhic-eoghainn>

¹³ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Clan_MacQuarrie

paying serious attention to the Antares charts, take your yacht in amongst them to find a good anchorage.

Dhiseig

Not a lot here although I suppose you could walk up the track¹⁴ to the top of Ben More — 966m or 3169 ft, so a Munro. But it would take you most of the day and it is a bit of a slog up this side of the mountain. The beach by the anchorage is stony, there are a couple of burns burbling their way under stone bridges, but that is about it. However, the views from the anchorage are spectacular, so probably best as a lunch stop on a nice day. The small road along the coast does not intrude too much, although I suppose it might at the height of the tourist season.

Eilean an Fheoir (Sgeir Alltachd)

Not a lot to this anchorage. Too near the ‘main’ road, and nothing very obvious to do ashore. But the views north to Ben More are pretty good

Fionnphort

When anchoring off Fionnphort¹⁵ you have to keep out of the way of the ferry, and on land from the tourist hoards heading for Iona — 140 000 a year it is said. There can be an astonishing number of coaches lined up on the harbour wall. However, if you do anchor, there are some rather good things to do (the alternative is anchor in the Bull Hole and walk over to Fionnphort, see above).

The village shop has a giftie sort of a place attached to it (Fingal Arts and Crafts), and attached to that is a remarkably good little bookshop, at least for books about Scotland and in particular the West Coast¹⁶. Aross on the beach you will find a huge granite boulder with a most impressive split through it, apparently made by local quarrymen in 1870, before the Duke of Argyll stopped them going further when he realised that the rock was of geological interest. And of course the typically-for-these-parts pink granite rocks are all around.

And finally, if you walk a few minutes up the hill out of the village, you will come to a small road to the left leading to a small and rather swish restaurant which opened in 2009 in a converted bothy — the Ninth Wave Restaurant¹⁷, where *“luxury meets sustainability”* (ph 01681 700757). A few years later it won the Highlands and Islands Restaurant of the year award, then into the Good Food Guide. Impressive. Unfortunately children under 12 are not allowed (something to do with our crazed licensing laws). Jonny Lamont does the fishing during the day and serves the wine in the evening, while his Canadian wife Carla cooks and explains every course (and has written a book about how they got to be where they are¹⁸). Sounds great, and absolutely is great. Only 16 covers, ever so friendly, no rush, relaxed, brilliant cooking. Strangely they are now only doing lunches (which are not inexpensive).

¹⁴ <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/mull/ben-more-mull.shtml>

¹⁵ <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/mull/fionnphort/index.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.ferryshopmull.co.uk/>

¹⁷ <https://www.ninthwaverestaurant.co.uk/>

¹⁸ The Ninth Wave. Love and Food on the Isle of Mull. Birlinn. Edinburgh. 2014

Gometra Harbour

This is a popular bolthole if you are on passage around the west side of Mull, or having a rough time out at the Treshnish Islands. It certainly gets loads of boats, but there is loads of room. There are two anchorages on Gometra¹⁹, an island which is connected to Ulva by a causeway and bridge — Gometra harbour here in the south, and Acarsaid Mòr in the north (see above), so good in all winds. You can walk between them along a farm track which makes a very pleasant stroll with stunning views from Mull to Iona to the Treshnish Islands to Coll. There is a smashing little beach at the head of the first bay west of Gometra Harbour (if you can ignore the plastic litter). Before that there is an increasingly unkempt burial ground just up from the anchorage — Bail' A'Chlaidh²⁰, in which are buried three unidentified men of the British Merchant Navy from the second world war. There are several abandoned cottages on the hill near by. The first roofed cottage on the track is now I believe a small shop (can that really be true?), and then comes Jane Anne's Bothy which apparently can be rented.

Gometra House is 18th century and seems to command a well-organised farm with a lot of sheep, and signposts to direct you around. They are tipped with light blue which makes one wonder if the owner of the island is a Cambridge man, but no — he went to Bristol university. Roc Sandford bought the island in 1991 and lives in the house, at least for some of the year, which has no central heating, no electricity, and no hot water. You used to get the idea from his very informative website which no longer exists: *"We have no reasonable access to a doctor or teacher, no reliable internet, mobile or land line, no cars or public transport, and we are off-grid. There is no working washing machine on the island. We usually have cold running water (though there are spells when the springs dry and water must be collected from the burns and boiled) and we often have hot or at least warm water"*. And from a lecture he gave in 2019²¹. He is an active ecowarrior who lives 'off grid'²².

Apparently grain was once grown here for the monastery on Iona. Now the resident population of the whole island is I understand only two, which is perhaps not too surprising given the difficulty getting supplies from the mainland to Mull to Ulva to Gometra.

Inch Kenneth

One medieval chapel and one strange house²³. And very quiet — is there anyone at home? Even in the late 18th century Samuel Johnson found *"its only inhabitants were Sir Allan Maclean and two young ladies, his daughters, with their servants"*²⁴. Now there is nobody, at least not all round the year. The anchorage seems quite far out from the shore but is pretty good, even I should imagine in rough weather. There is a very extensive foreshore with loads of pools and patches of sand, ideal for children, and for the grown-ups too, with great views of the awesome Mull cliffs, particularly in the evening light.

¹⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gometra>

²⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/21821/gometra-bail-a-chlaidh>

²¹ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uI3-aerwaY4>

²² https://www.facebook.com/roc.sandford?locale=en_GB

²³ <https://iona-bed-breakfast-mull.com/attractions/mull-iona-staffa/mull/islands/inch-kenneth/>

²⁴ A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland'. Samuel Johnson, 1775, Ed RW Chapman, Oxford University Press, 1970. A real classic, and full of interest about the people, posh and not so posh, and on the nature of the Scottish as seen from the viewpoint of a Londoner in his 60s.

The 13th century and long-ruined chapel²⁵ is perhaps over-restored with rather crude pointing but there is quite a lot of it to admire along with the Iona graveslabs, and a graveyard to reflect in as you gaze at the view of the cliffs on Mull.

Inch Kenneth House²⁶ is famous as having been the home, from 1938, of the Mitford family with their Nazi and Fascist connections (it is even rumoured that Hitler once visited here). There is a wonderful filmed interview²⁷ with Deborah, the youngest Mitford sister, reminiscing about her times in the house. The family sold it for £25 000 in 1967 to Yvonne Barlow, an artist, and her late husband, who in 2011 said she wanted to open the house to the public but I don't think that ever happened. She actually lived in London so I imagine the house is unoccupied for most of the year. Recently she passed it on to her children, Claire and Martin Barlow. Apparently it still contains some Nazi memorabilia. The house itself is moderately ugly, a strange battlemented confection originally built in the 1830s and then much altered in the 1930s, rather dull. The flattish roof is designed to collect rainwater (and is no doubt subject to leaks). In 2017 there were some signs of life, a wind turbine had appeared, and a distant person. Something might be stirring.

The island's name is derived from 'innis' (island) and ('St Cainneach', the Irish saint), another of St Columba's mates.

Kilfinichen

You won't find many boats sailing up and down Loch Scridain, partly because you need a northerly or southerly wind to do it comfortably in each direction, and partly because it is quite a long way in — and out again. But for the easy-going cruising man it has charm, scenery and solitude, and a few nice anchorages where there will be no other boats. Also for those that have read 'Tea with Chrissie'²⁸, the north shore is where it all happened (the very last cottage to the west which you see on the way in is where she lived).

You can anchor in Kilfinichen Bay itself or east of the point which is maybe nearer to the shore and to an old pontoon (the estate manager told me there is an unmarked rock there but I neither saw it nor hit it). The Kilfinichen estate²⁹ is vast, extending across most of the Ardmeanach peninsular and up Ben More. It has all been gradually acquired, bit by bit, since 1965, and — according to 'Tea with Chrissie' — once using an intermediary, apparently to avoid suspicion, by the landowner who I believe lived in London.

There is a very pleasant walk around the bay along the road and then by a left fork up to Tiroran House Hotel³⁰ which wins lots of awards and sounds pretty good. Non-residents are nowadays welcome for dinner (I think) so I must give it a go (ph 01681 705232). The Whitetail Gin Café is part of the same operation, for coffee, buns and presumably gin too (but no sign of it now on the hotel website).

²⁵ <http://www.mull-historical-society.co.uk/churches/churches-2/inch-kenneth/>

²⁶ <https://www.isle-of-mull.net/locations/islands-around-mull/inch-kenneth/>

²⁷ <https://vimeo.com/14940958>

²⁸ Rosalind Jones. *Tea with Chrissie, the story of Burg and Ardmeanach on the Isle of Mull.* cCraignire Publications, Mull, 2007.

²⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/kilfinichenmull/>

³⁰ <https://www.tiroran.com/>

Loch Beg

Not a lot of point anchoring here, it is too bleak and open. Better to head for Kilfinichen Bay (above).

Loch Cuan (Croig)

After a slightly tense entrance (at least in the days before chartplotters), this is a delightful spot, at least in quiet weather from the south, and when there is not too much swell. The small harbour at Croig (of crab and lobster fame) with an old jetty has less space than outside Goat Island (with the obelisk), but also less swell and it is a shorter row to the shore. There are a lot of seals on the skerries, and there is a small beach facing northwest where there is excellent snorkelling for crabs and other assorted sea-life. There is also a larger beach just round the corner, facing southeast, but it is not so charming. In both cases there is not much sand left at high water springs.

It is a bit of a row, but the Quinish Estate³¹ over on the east shore has some splendid walks and views — and a standing stone (from the anchorage, you can see the big house, circa 1810, peeping out through the trees).

It is also a bit of a walk, maybe a mile, from Croig to Am Birlinn³² at Penmore Mill, a highly regarded — and ecologically respectable — fish restaurant (ph 01688 400619). They might give you a lift if you call them. I have not been there but they win prizes.

You can also take the tender up to the village of Dervaig³³ but I am not sure it is really worth the effort — you certainly need an outboard rather than oars. It is quite a pretty place, being a 'planned' village, the old part of which was built in the early 1800s. The Bellachroy Hotel³⁴ is apparently the oldest inn on the island, dating from 1608 it is said. It has a bar with food, a gastropub indeed (ph 01688 400314). There is quite a nice church³⁵ with a conically-capped round tower just like the church on Canna (no surprise once you know the same architect was responsible for both — Peter MacGregor Chalmers). It was built in 1904 and after a fairly recent restoration is looking very good, inside and out, and the stained glass is notable. But I am not sure about the tower which is too in-your-face-white for my taste. Of course the round tower brings to mind the Irish Romanesque towers, as it is meant to, but it seems a bit out of place in Scotland.

Loch na Keal

Like Loch Scridain, you need a wind blowing across this loch to sail comfortably up and down it enjoying the views, particularly the close-up of Ben More. There must be lots of places to anchor, some are in the Sailing Directions, but I have not tried many of them beyond Ulva Ferry (see below).

³¹ <http://quinish.co.uk/>

³² <https://ambirlinn.com/>

³³ <https://www.isle-of-mull.net/locations/dervaig/>

³⁴ <https://www.thebellachroy.co.uk/>

³⁵ <http://www.mull-historical-society.co.uk/churches/churches-2/kilmore/>

Loch Mingary

Slightly tricky entrance to this one, and not good if there is any swell or the wind is in the north. But it is the most convenient anchorage for a visit to Glengorm Castle³⁶. If you can be bothered, and you should, there is a really nice 45-minute walk up to the castle. Land on the northeast shore and walk northeast for a few minutes until you hit the head of Laorin Bay with its small stone pier. A Land Rover track heads from here up the hill. It will take you all the way to the castle via, on the left, three standing stones which generations of landowners have kindly left alone for us to admire and ponder their purpose (two have been re-erected apparently). And if you want another little detour, have a wander up to An Sean Dun³⁷ which is on the hill just south of the wood through which the track goes, and for a dun there is quite a bit of it left. There is also a bathing pool which is sluiced and filled by the sea. It is just southwest of the Iron Age fort — Dùn Ara³⁸. Maybe get to it along the coast from Laorin Bay, as well as more obviously along a track from the castle.

The castle is a marvellous Victorian pile, high up overlooking the northwest entrance to the Sound of Mull, clearly visible from the sea as a kind of exotic fairy tale sort of a place. But close up it is rather dull and stark, at least for my taste. However, the views from the rooms overlooking the Sound must be fantastic, and it does have a fabulous and huge walled market garden, supplemented with lots of polytunnels — wonderful.

The house and the estate have been owned by the Nelson family for over 50 years. They successfully run it as a farm, farm shop (local venison, Mull cheddar, Tobermory trout etc), an excellent café for lunch and tea, an art gallery, self catering, B&B, and a wedding venue. Rather impressive. And, better still, in 2018 they started planting 70 000 native trees. The whole place has a really good feel to it, I imagine because the owners actually live on the estate all the year round. So if you want to get married there, or maybe stay in one of their upmarket rooms, have a look at their really excellent website³⁹ and click on.

Lunga

The Treshnish Islands⁴⁰ now belong to the National Trust for Scotland and are a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI). These days there is also certainly a lot of interest from tourist boats coming and going to Lunga, which is the most accessible of the islands. Ideally anchor off Lunga overnight when you should have the place mostly to yourself. The anchorage is not as exposed as it looks, and is fine even if a gale is blowing, provided it comes from the west. If you are bothered, escape across to Gometra (see above). McLintock got it right in 1938: '*Our anchorage was a most intriguing place, surrounded on all sides by islands and barren rocks*'.⁴¹

³⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Glengorm_Castle

³⁷ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22079/an-sean-dun-mull>

³⁸ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22069/mull-dun-ara>

³⁹ <http://glengormcastle.co.uk/>

⁴⁰ <https://www.nts.org.uk/visit/places/treshnish-isles>

⁴¹ 'West Coast Cruising'. John McLintock, Blackie and Son, Glasgow, 1938. A between-the-wars account of not so much the cruises in chronological order, but of the author's experiences on the west coast. There is too much history, fairy tales and misty Celtic legends for my taste, all dressed up in purple prose. Nonetheless, it gives a good idea of what the anchorages were like, along with some pilotage information. Curiously we are told nothing about what sort of boat he sailed, or about the people he met along the way, or about himself.

The Harp rock, only 15-20 minutes walk away, is by far the best seabird-nesting cliff for viewing in the whole area, it is spectacular. Hang on to any small children, the path is narrow in places. Take binoculars to look at the thousands of guillemots, razorbills and kittiwakes that nest there, plus some fulmars too. And a camera. Lie on the cliffs and look down at the auks swimming under the clear water. And on the way you cannot miss the incredibly tame puffins nesting on the edge of the cliffs, and the shags snapping at you from their nests beside the path. More difficult to track down are the storm petrels which fly in after dark to their nests amongst the stones on the beach. I believe that Manx shearwaters also nest hereabouts, again only coming in at night.

Of course, in the spring the whole place is ablaze with wild flowers — bluebells, primroses, sea campion and flag irises all at the same time in late May. In the autumn, from about mid September, the seabirds have mostly long gone but your visit will be rewarded by the sight of baby Atlantic seals along the boulder beach by the anchorage, their parents swimming just offshore (or guarding their young, so don't get between them).

It is difficult to imagine, but 20 people apparently lived on Lunga 200 years ago, the last one left in the mid-19th century. And there, just above the cliff with all the puffins, are the remains of seven roofless black houses, some probably full height. They are easy to miss if, like me, you have been obsessed with looking at all the puffins on every visit. But where is the well that must have been here to supply the islanders with water?

Lunga was made famous by the ecologist Frank Fraser Darling⁴² (1903-1979) in his book 'Island Years' (1940). He camped here with his wife and young child for several months.

Martyrs' Bay, Iona

The pressure on Iona of national and international tourism is more extreme than anywhere else on the West Coast. Clearly the tourist office knows its business. Where else do the tourists feed and then overfeed the seagulls? Where else would an American tourist ask my very English friend from Dorset to pose for a photo because she assumed he was "*one of the locals around here*"? And where else is there a vegetarian dinner, bed and breakfast (no bacon or black pudding for sure)? Mind you in winter everywhere shuts up, including both hotels, and the place is weirdly deserted, even though nearly 200 people live on the island.

But despite the extreme pressures of tourism, Iona⁴³ radiates peace and charm, perhaps because of the remarkably temperate climate; or the fertile land. Or the centuries of Christianity of which there is a lot around after being introduced here from Ireland by St Columba in the 6th century (Kings from three countries are buried here — Scotland, Ireland and Norway). Certainly the wonderful quality of the light attracts artists, and the views across to the formidable backdrop of Mull constantly amaze. "*Perhaps in the revolutions of the world, Iona may be sometime again the instructress of the Western Regions*" speculated Samuel Johnson in 1773 when he surveyed the ecclesiastical ruins, and poverty, that was then Iona.⁴⁴

⁴² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Fraser_Darling

⁴³ <https://www.isle-of-iona.net/>

⁴⁴ Johnson *ibid*.

Although the anchorage is slightly dodgy and exposed, with a tedious swell and tide, it would be a shame not to stop, for a few hours anyway. But watch out, this is the one place I have got an anchor so stuck that it bent in my efforts to release it. Of course it is frustrating not to be able to spend longer here. But you can always anchor in the Bull Hole (see above), walk to Fionnphort — or even anchor there, although it is tricky with the ferry and various cables — and then take the ferry to Iona. Or in quiet conditions, anchor a bit up the coast at Port na Fraing (see below).

In high summer it is perhaps best to go ashore later in the day when most of the tourists have departed by ferry back to Mull, but not too late or everywhere will have closed. Take a look at the Abbey⁴⁵ in peace and quiet. Originally a Benedictine monastery, it was destroyed during the 16th century Reformation and lay more-or-less derelict until the mid-20th century when George MacLeod founded the Iona Community⁴⁶ which remarkably brought together ministers and craftsmen to restore the Abbey to what you see now. Maybe it is a bit too tidy and thus sterile, but it is still an astounding achievement. It is fascinating to compare the interior stonework — some new, other bits old and weathered from being so long in the open air. Lots of work for stonemasons here. 'Pevsner' as ever hits the nail on the head *'This is no ruin merely arrested in its decay to charm or intrigue the tourist but a working church restored to worship and religious study, brought back to the island, however improbable it may seem, by 20th century faith'*⁴⁷. The adjoining museum, opened in 2011, is very well laid out. Lots of high crosses and graveslabs. The 12th century St Oran's chapel in the Abbey grounds is a favourite of mine — very small, very quiet, very simple.

These days everything is looked after by Historic Environment Scotland but the Iona Community remains very active — a *"dispersed Christian ecumenical community working for peace and social justice, rebuilding of community and the renewal of worship"*. Their welcome centre, gift and bookshop across the road from the Abbey has the biggest collection of religious books I have ever seen.

On the way to the Abbey, walk through the ruined Augustinian 12th century nunnery⁴⁸, again abandoned after the Reformation. Carefully tended flowers grow on the old walls and in a wild garden. But it was not quite as neat when Pennant visited in the 18th century: *"The floor is covered some feet thick with cow-dung; this place being at present the common shelter for the cattle; the islanders are too lazy to remove this fine manure, the collection of a century, to enrich their grounds"*⁴⁹. He clearly had a very low opinion of the inhabitants who he thought *"the most stupid and the most lazy of all the islanders"*!

⁴⁵ <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/iona-abbey-and-nunnery/history/>

⁴⁶ <https://iona.org.uk/>

⁴⁷ 'Pevsner' is my generic term for all those wonderfully detailed books about the buildings of England, Scotland, Ireland and Wales which were started by Nikolaus Pevsner, the architectural historian, and written between 1951 and 1974. The two volumes you need are Argyll and Bute by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and Highlands and Islands by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

⁴⁸ <https://www.historicenvironment.scot/visit-a-place/places/iona-abbey-and-nunnery/history/>

⁴⁹ Thomas Pennant's A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides 1772, Birlinn, Edinburgh 1998, is a surprisingly easy read, far from pompous, and less dated than one might have imagined. He had a real interest in everything he saw from what people farmed and ate, to a bit of history, to the flora and fauna, and more.

There is something very mystical about all this early Christianity. As a baptised and confirmed member of the Church of England, but no longer a believer if ever I was, it is impossible not to be affected by the place. Certainly years ago one of our crew was — she bunked off and took the bus home to London!

The Iona Heritage Centre⁵⁰ is a small and informative museum, with a lovely hidden-away café and shady garden (not open evenings). It is in the old manse, another Telford, as is the adjacent 1828 parish church although it has been switched around inside so the original pulpit which was on the south wall has gone, and there is more of a lectern instead — rather dull

There are a number of food and crafty shops⁵¹ to wander around in the only village, and you can of course stock up on bread and milk. There are a couple of hotels which I have not properly explored. The Argyll Hotel⁵² in 2012 (ph 01681 700 334) has an excellent position and is more scenic outside than inside. The narrow road in front of the hotel is particularly charming, and note the Post Office. The St Columba Hotel⁵³ (ph 01681 700304) on the way to the Abbey seems a rather grander place than the Argyll where it is nice to eat on the lawn in the sunshine.

For young children, Martyrs' beach, right by the anchorage, is a tiny paradise of fine sand and turquoise sea, and at the right time of the year there are corncrakes calling. For the energetic, bikes are for hire to explore the island.

And if you must, there is — amazingly — an 18-hole golf course⁵⁴, so informal it is free. It is in a fabulous setting on the bright green machair less than a mile from the pier. No club house, no toilets, but plenty of sheep and cows, and a bull. I could even be tempted to take up golf if I lived here. There is a good walk across the course to St Columba's beach at the south end of the island, about an hour from the anchorage. Great views out towards Jura, and an excellent variety of smooth sea-worn stones on the vast stony beach — granite, marble, limestone and so on. The great man himself came ashore here in his coracle in 563. On the way, just past the lochan above the golf course, turn uphill southeast and then down to the rocky shore where you will find the very obvious remains of an abandoned — in 1919 — marble quarry (grid reference 268218).

What Frank Cowper wrote over 100 years ago is still very true: *"For anyone who thinks at all it is impossible to approach this low, rugged, treeless island without at least some sense of wonder; some questionings as to the working of mind over matter"*.⁵⁵ So do go and wonder.

⁵⁰ <http://www.ionaheritage.co.uk/history/index.html>

⁵¹ <https://www.isle-of-iona.net/shops/>

⁵² <https://www.argyllhoteliona.co.uk/>

⁵³ <https://www.stcolumba-hotel.co.uk/>

⁵⁴ <https://scottishgolfcourses-allofthem.blogspot.com/2011/08/iona-golf-course-12-august-2011.html>

⁵⁵ Frank Cowper, *Sailing Tours: the yachtsman's guide to the cruising waters of the English and adjacent coasts. Part V. The west coasts of Scotland, the Orkneys and the west coast of the North Sea.* Upcott Gill, London.1896. There is more here than just sailing directions, but little information about what there was ashore, and he did not much describe many human interactions. But his descriptions of sailing with no engine in strong tidal streams are pretty hair raising, particularly bearing in mind he was often single-handed. A lot of the pilotage information could be used today.

Port na Fraing

Port na Fraing is just north of a slipway, and you can also anchor a bit further north still off Tràigh Bàn nam Manach — the white strand of the monks — a spectacular beach. Wonderful jagged rocks by the shore, smoothly polished granite pebbles as big as cricket balls, fabulous white sand, startling green machair, and a backdrop of the cliffs and mountains of Mull. No wonder the Scottish colourists⁵⁶ came to paint here, as indeed artists still do. This is just the place for a hot and peaceful afternoon, not for getting the shopping because it takes half-an-hour to walk to the village. But, without heavy bags, not too far to visit the Abbey.

Port Rainich

This appears to be in the middle of nowhere, but once upon a time someone bothered to build the pier which seems to grow out of the rocks, along with a ruined house, containing a rusting bedstead, and the store beside it. And someone is clearly still using the facility for fishing. A quiet spot for a pause, with views of the Treshnish Islands. And in 2023 a very nice looking restaurant appeared by the main road up the hill – Croft 3 (ph 07973 448284).⁵⁷ Try it, I certainly will.

Scarisdale

Not a lot to do here, maybe just a stroll in the deciduous woods across the very minor road which runs along the side of the loch — the scenic route between Salen and Bunessan (it is very scenic indeed). And the road which I once ran along in the dark, the only time I attempted the Ben More run in the Scottish Islands Peaks Race⁵⁸, a horrible experience never to be repeated.

Soa Island

Not really an overnight anchorage but rather good for a lunch stop. At the head of the inlet is a white shell beach which I suspect covers at high tide. Ashore there are loads of wild flowers and nesting birds — fulmars, shags and oystercatchers mostly. If you make the effort to clamber up to the top of the hill above the anchorage there is a fantastic panorama from Iona to Mull to the Torran rocks to Jura to Colonsay to Islay to Tiree, Col and the Treshnish islands.

Staffa

Everyone but everyone must have heard of Staffa,⁵⁹ as well as Fingal's Cave (An Uaimh Bhinn, the melodious cave) and Mendelssohn and his Hebridean overture⁶⁰ first performed in London in 1832. But not that many people have been there. But Jules Verne has. He set the denouement of *The Green Ray* here, a rather wonderful 19th century novel based on his travels in Scotland (Luath Press, 2009). Even earlier, in 1772 Joseph Banks went quite overboard with admiration, quoted in Pennant's *Tour in Scotland*: "*Compared to this what are*

⁵⁶ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scottish_Colourists

⁵⁷ <https://www.croft3mull.co.uk/>

⁵⁸ <https://www.scottishislandspeaksrace.com/>

⁵⁹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Staffa>

⁶⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zcogD-hHEYs>

*the cathedrals or the palaces built by men? Mere models or playthings, imitations as diminutive as his works will always be when compared to those of nature. Where is now the boast of the architect?"*⁶¹ And in 1814 Walter Scott also got his oar in too "*stupendous columnar side walls ... the variety of tints ... august billows ... circumstances elsewhere unparalleled*" and so on.⁶²

The island was gifted to the National Trust for Scotland in 1986 by Eleanor Elliott on whose behalf it had been bought for £150 000 by her husband Jock Elliott, an advertising executive from New York, for her 60th birthday. There's a nice idea for a birthday present — give your wife a Scottish island. The island has not been inhabited for years, probably since about the late 18th century.

It is a dodgy spot to anchor, only sensible in quiet conditions, and maybe best to leave someone on board while the rest of the crew land and walk round to look into Fingal's cave, after that you leave (land by the small pier, turn left and follow the stony path for 10 minutes where one time I was there a woman fell and broke her arm, so hold on to the railing). On a really quiet day you can take your dinghy into the cave itself, another great Hebridean experience. The cave is huge, the rock is volcanic basalt and has been formed into amazing more-or-less vertical hexagonal columns. Also do the short walk up to the top of the island where you get a fabulous view, and where there are countless Hebridean wild flowers but, as I said earlier, it is unwise to leave your boat for very long at anchor.

This island is definitely worth a detour, a romantic must. But best done early or late in the day to avoid the many tourist boats that bring people over from Mull and Iona. Not so many in the 19th century: Jules Verne again: "*Except during the visit of tourists which lasts for barely an hour twice a week, we will not be disturbed by anyone*" and "*It is impossible to imagine a more spectacular route to take to this cave, which was in itself worthy of being inhabited by some hero from One Thousand and one Nights*".⁶³ And from probably the first guide book to the Highlands, written by the intrepid traveller, the Hon Sarah Murray: "*The greatest wonder, I verily believe, existing on the face of the globe; namely, the island of Staffa*".⁶⁴

Ulva ferry

Ulva⁶⁵ is a pretty island but also in some ways depressing, certainly sad because the physical remnants of the past community of about 600 people are still so very obvious — the decaying and dilapidated church, the overgrown fields, and the ruined cottages buried in the bracken. However, it is a quiet haven, and the coastal scenery is fascinating with a mixture of basalt columns and limestone outcrops.

⁶¹ Pennant *ibid*.

⁶² *The Voyage of the Pharos*. Sir Walter Scott, Scottish Library Association, 1968. An account of his 1814 cruise around Scotland as a guest of the Commissioners of the Northern Lights, on the Lighthouse Yacht, Pharos; rather more readable than his novels

⁶³ *The Green Ray*, Jules Verne, Luath Press 2009. A 19th century romantic novel based on the author's journeys in Scotland, culminating in derring-do on Staffa. Also reads like a travel book, and as such is extremely accurate.

⁶⁴ 'A companion and useful Guide to the Beauties of Scotland, and the Hebrides' first published in 1803 was probably the first travel guide to Scotland, written by a quite posh but very adventurous English lady, the Hon Sarah Murray. Characteristic of her period, she rather overused the word 'sublime'.

⁶⁵ <https://www.ulva.scot/>

The island had been privately owned by the Howard family⁶⁶ for decades until in 2017 it was put up for sale (offers over £4.25 million), causing considerable uncertainty for the six people who still lived there. Perhaps against the odds, a community buy-out was successful in 2018, most of the money coming from the Scottish Land Fund. Various old properties are being refurbished, new affordable homes have been built, and the population has now risen to 11 or more. Whether the island can become economically viable we can but wait and see, and hope. There is, not surprisingly, an on-demand passenger and bike ferry across to Mull⁶⁷ where in 2016 some handy pontoons opened, with diesel fuel as well as the usual water and electricity (how the pontoons will pay for themselves I just don't know). This facility is being expanded with not just toilets but also into a community hub by the Mull and Iona Community Trust⁶⁸

The usual anchorage is delightful with a great view of Ben More, so spiky from this aspect, not the rather uninteresting shape it is from elsewhere. The Boathouse café does excellent seafood. When I was first there in 2007 it seemed to be in a state of glum sullenness but things became a whole lot better when the lease was acquired by Emma Mckie and Rebecca Munro. Indeed, into the Good Food Guide in 2018. In 2021 it was taken over by a couple from Edinburgh and we must wait to see what they make of it (ph 01688 500241).⁶⁹ The café wasn't open on Saturdays, or Sundays except in the summer, presumably because the ferry doesn't run on those days, and nor in the evenings. This may have changed.

The adjacent restored Sheila's cottage is rather good because it shows how a blackhouse was in the not so distant past — uncomfortable and probably very cold and damp in winter. Then take a walk around the edge of Ulva House (1950s rather dull-looking from the outside, to be converted into self-catering units) and the farm, and the 1828 church⁷⁰ designed by Thomas Telford and with a double-tier wooden pulpit.

You can anchor briefly nearer the café but watch out for passing fishing boats and the underwater cables (probably better to row across from the pontoons). And then, after lunch but not so much alcohol you are seeing double, have a go at Ulva Sound.

⁶⁶ <http://www.isleofulva.com/>

⁶⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/theulvaferry>

⁶⁸ <https://www.mict.co.uk/>

⁶⁹ <https://www.ulva.scot/new-tenants-for-the-boathouse-restuarant-on-ulva>

⁷⁰ <http://www.mull-historical-society.co.uk/churches/churches-2/ulva/>