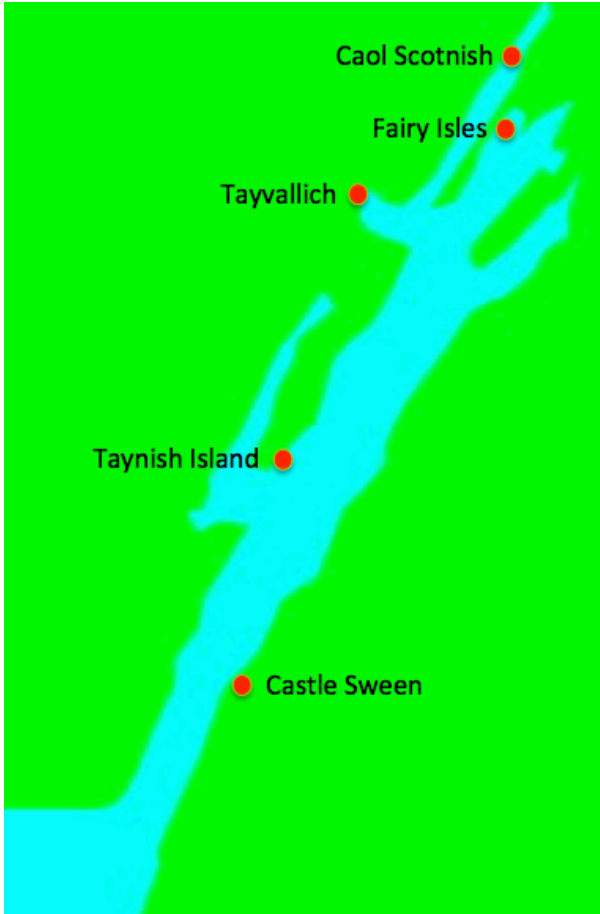


Loch Sween

Last updated 6th January 2024



A long way in — and a long way out — but nice if you are in a relaxed frame of mind, and not in a hurry. It's all very pretty with lots of deciduous trees each side of the loch. Gentle cruising. As Frank Cowper observed in *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: *"The loch is broken up into so many bays, and even subsidiary lochs, and is so beautifully wooded in the valleys which alternate with hills all along its shores that it forms a charming scene to be explored.* Over a century later not much has changed, except for the march of the pine plantations. There must be many places to anchor, as well as those in the *Sailing Directions.* Tayvallich is good for stores, Castle Sween has a beach as well as the castle, and the Fairy Isles are aptly named.

Caol Scotnish

Although I can see it would be quite fun exploring this wooded arm of Loch Sween, there is not much point. There is a road all along one side which, although single track, does carry quite a bit of traffic to and from Tayvallich. Anyway, right next door is the far quieter Fairy Isles anchorage (see below), although it can get crowded in the summer. Also, there is nothing particular to see — or to do — which you can't also see and do from the Fairy Isles.

Castle Sween

There are only two reasons to linger in this anchorage — you are either very keen on castles, or you want an emergency beach-stop for the children. Otherwise avert your eyes from the huge caravan park which dominates the whole place. And beware the speeding jet skis. Castle Sween¹ itself is very ancient, built in the late 12th century, modified over the years and then abandoned in the mid 17th century. It still stands bound to its rock and no doubt will continue to do so for long after the caravans have disintegrated.

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Castle_Sween

Fairy Isles The name is apt. The dark green interlocking lagoons separated by small islands and dotted with rocks is indeed a magical place. Altogether a delightful spot. The anchorage is surrounded by enough deciduous trees that you don't really notice the dreary conifers of Knapdale. There is a forest road along its edge if you want a bit of a walk through the woods. On a still evening take a row around in the tender to look at the seals and birds. On a hot afternoon explore the shallow lagoon just to the north of the main anchorage and try and spot the flatfish, starfish, crabs and tiny shrimp-like creatures scuttling around on the seabed. In short, just dawdle. And watch out for the ospreys which definitely have a nest hereabouts. There is one drawback — the anchorage loses the evening sun.

Taynish Island

A neat little lunch-stop half way up Loch Sween, or for overnight. Just up the bay there is a strange circular and castellated structure, not a boathouse, but some sort of Victorian (I imagine) bathhouse. It belongs to whoever owns the mostly 17th century and attractive Taynish House² above the anchorage, which all looks a bit private, as does the nearer 'Round House' which is actually octagonal and was once a dairy and then a gun-room. The farm buildings are derelict. It is all so far away and private that it was once, it is said, the hideaway for the future King Edward VII's mistress (and I imagine for the mistresses of other posh blokes too). It is where John Lorne Campbell spent his childhood, the man who bought and then gave away Canna³. Walking along the shore is nice, as well exploring the Taynish National Nature Reserve⁴ which stretches all the way to Tayvallich — loads of nature and lovely walks, deciduous woodland, a huge ruined watermill, and lots of dragonflies^{5,6}.

Tayvallich

On its west shore, round a little bay, island-locked, straggles the village of Tayvallich, a perfect anchorage, where on the wildest day you may ride secure while the seas make white tumult on the other side of the protecting rock-spit".⁷ wrote John McLintock, in 1938. A bit different these days. If you could now imagine Tayvallich⁸ without all the moorings, none of which seem to be available for visitors, and particularly without the characterless modern houses

² <https://vimeo.com/139571266>

³ Ray Perman. *The Man who gave away his Island, A life of John Lorne Campbell of Canna*. Birlinn, 2010.

⁴ <https://www.nature.scot/search?query=taynish>

⁵ <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/argyll/taynish.shtml>

⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=C2Hq2E2A2n0>

⁷ West Coast Cruising. John McLintock, Blackie and Son, Glasgow, 1938 is a between the wars account of not so much cruises in chronological order, but of the author's experiences on the west coast. However, 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 of what sort of boat he sailed, or with whom, and nor did he tell us anything about the people he met along the way. Or himself.

⁸ <https://www.tayvallich.com/>

outnumbering the older much more charming (but no doubt less well insulated) cottages, then it would indeed be 'a perfect anchorage'. Later, in the 1930s, Capt Harvey was writing: "*the builders of the new houses have not been very happy in their choice of materials*"⁹. 'Pevsner' puts it even better — "*A ring of indifferent holiday cottages now outnumbering the few surviving old rubble cottages. From the north caravans advance ominously*"¹⁰. The late 19th century church reflects well the takeover by the new at the expense of the old — I hope there was a good reason to replace half the wooden pews and their lovely polished brass umbrella stands with horrible modern chairs.

Sadly, there is almost no space to anchor and the pontoon can only be used for a one hour stay¹¹, as long as you don't leave the boat, so dropping in for coffee and some shopping is problematic, as would having a meal at the inn. Anchoring just outside the enclosed bay is however an option, if a little distant from the city centre.

There is a small but useful shop which can come in handy for fresh milk, and an excellent coffee shop¹² with a deck overlooking the bay but now only opening over weekends and Mondays (I think). Certainly there is a strong sense of community here with a sailing club, camera club and art classes.

One plus is the Tayvallich Inn¹³ although since it changed hands in late 2009 and then again in 2017 I have not been there (ph 01546 870282). However, it is one of only 16 pubs listed in the Michelin guide to eating out in pubs in Scotland, so it must be good. It is really hard to keep up with these small restaurants because they change hands so quickly, and I imagine it is very difficult to attract chefs and then get them to stay, or rather come back in the spring because so many of these places are closed for the winter.

Of course the anchorage is totally sheltered and easy to get into but somehow this is not enough, particularly when Loch Sween has other attractive options. However, if you do get stuck here on a bad day, there is the possibility of a bus ride into Lochgilphead and the swimming pool (aka MacPool)¹⁴.

All in all I am not sure that Tayvallich is really worth a big detour, especially with such a delightful alternative just round the corner — the Fairy Isles (see above).

⁹ 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. What it says on the cover, well written descriptions of summer holidays on not much money, and even without a 'paid hand' "*my young family and I have always managed somehow*". There is also a lot of technical stuff on charts and how to make them, navigation, compass deviation, how to organise a boat — most of which is not that interesting. But information about many of the anchorages is still relevant. As was so common in those days the engine was unreliable and a lot of time was spent towing the boat with the dinghy, and by horse or even manpower along the Crinan canal.

¹⁰ '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 for these anchorages are Argyll and Bute by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and Highlands and Islands by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

¹¹ <https://www.tayvallich.com/sailing/visiting-yachts>

¹² <https://www.tayvallichenterprises.com/cafe-home.html#visit>

¹³ <https://www.tayvallichinn.com/>

¹⁴ <https://macpool.org.uk/>

By the way, if you want to impress, the pronunciation of Tayvallich has an additional syllable — *tay-vee-allich* — after the original Gaelic *Tigh a'bhealaich*, house of the pass (between Carsaig Bay on the Sound of Jura and Loch Sween, over which the drovers used to drive their cattle to market).