

South and East Mull

Last updated 5th March 2022



The south coast of Mull is exposed to the prevailing wind and there are not that many safe anchorages which are easy to enter. Once round the southeast corner however, you will find one of the best anchorages in Scotland — Loch Spelve. So you the boatie will see this coast mostly from the sea rather than from exploring on the land.

Carsaig Bay

This is a really grand and dramatic spot. Towering volcanic cliffs surround a fertile limestone glen. If you anchor behind the island, there are a lot of seals, but I prefer anchoring within the grandeur of the bay.

Ashore there is nothing special to see but there is a delightful circular walk, maybe a bit over an hour. On the way you can check out some of the scenes which were filmed here from the marvellous 1945 romantic film 'I know where I am going, particularly on the pier with crashing waves preventing the heroine getting to the Island of Kiloran (aka Colonsay) to be married. It starred Wendy Hiller and Richard Livesey (who actually never left London during the filming), and introduced a very young Petula Clark.

You can start the walk anywhere along the beach (note the wild goats and the swing). Head for the pier which has crumbled a lot since the film was made, built in 1850 for the British Fisheries Commission. The view across the rocks at low tide is great, a panorama from Scarba to Jura to Islay to Colonsay. Take a look at the armorial panel (Virtue Mine Honour) on one of the two fishermen's stores. Gillean, the great grand daughter of Archibald John of Penny Cross who had the nearby Inniemore Lodge built, told me that according to the family tradition, the panel was broken when being fixed to the Lodge so a new one was ordered and the broken

one placed on the boat shed. Then head up through deciduous and pine woods along the road to the left. Great views of your pride and joy lying at anchor. Past the Lodge (dull late Victorian), then by that surprisingly-placed telephone box and a dramatic waterfall (again used for a scene in 'I know where I am going'), turn downhill, skirt Carsaig House (rather nice circa 1800, a posh place to rent with many bedrooms) and farm, and follow a track along the burn back to the shore.

If you are energetic enough (which I have not been), one of the great walks in Scotland is under the cliffs to the west to the Carsaig Arches¹, but it takes about five hours there and back (however you can sort of 'do' the arches from the sea anyway if you sail in close enough). Or, equally energetic if shorter, head the other way along the coast to Loch Buie². If you don't want to walk back, leave someone on the boat to sail round to the Loch Buie anchorage to pick you up.

Croggan

Not many boats ever seem to anchor off this tiny and remote hamlet³. Maybe because they are drawn further into the enclosed mysteries of Loch Spelve, sparing just a glance at the surprising telephone box down on the stony beach (surely BT will be removing this sooner rather than later). But it is worth a stop even if you don't want to make a phone call. You are saved time if you are on passage, the views are rather better than in the loch, and in a way the shore is more interesting. There are a few houses, some new and not exactly attractive and one or two which used to look a bit tumbledown but are now restored; some nice gardens; a decaying pier; and a very pretty walk along a track by the shore towards the entrance to the loch. After about five minutes you come to one huge rock perched on top of another looking for all the world like a giant mushroom by the high water mark. Go on for another 20 minutes and you come to one of the few sandy (more or less) beaches in the Firth of Lorne, Port nan Crullach. A beautiful spot with rockpools and views. On the way, there are lovely trees and all the usual Hebridean flowers. A good place to explore if there is no wind for sailing. Up the hill from the beach there are scattered ruins of two abandoned and long forgotten villages — Barnashoag and Balmgamrie⁴ — from where you can make a beeline back to Croggan over the moor.

David Balfour's Bay

David Balfour's Bay (confusingly another Tràigh Gheal) is a delightful spot on the south side of Erraid⁵. This is an almost uninhabited tidal island apart from an off-shoot from the Findhorn Foundation⁶ since 1978. This is a small spiritual community living in the 19th century lighthouse-keeper cottages, built by the Stevensons as the shore station for the Dubh Artach and Skerryvore lighthouses. You can stay there for a personal retreat.

¹ <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/mull/carsaig-arches.shtml>

² <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/mull/carsaig-lochbuie.shtml>

³ <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/mull/croggan/index.html>

⁴ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22651/balgamrie-mull>

⁵ https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OpbPENwC_3I

⁶ <https://www.erraid.com/>

There is a fabulous beach, in fact there are two connected at low tide, backed by low cliffs which must be good for bouldering. The water is pristine, the sand brilliant for sand castles. And if you dare, you can go for jumps off the cliffs on the west side of the bay, checking the water depth first. No wonder it can get a bit crowded with maybe six or so boats at anchor when the wind is in the north.

This is known as David Balfour's bay because it is where Robert Louis Stevenson imagined Davie — in *Kidnapped* — being thrown ashore clutching a spar from the *Covenant*, his sinking ship wrecked on the Torran rocks (*"are there many of them?"* the captain had asked, revealing his poor grasp of navigation).

RLS was the black sheep of his family who were largely engineers. They built most of the Scottish lighthouses⁷ — indeed his father used to take him on trips by boat around the coast so he knew very well the places he later wrote about, at least from his memory because most of his stories were written after he had left Scotland. In 1890, near the end of his life in Samoa thousands of miles from Scotland, he wrote: *"Whenever I smell seawater, I know that I am not far from one of the works of my ancestors. The Bell Rock stands monument for my grandfather, the Skerry Vhor for my Uncle Alan; and when the lights come out at sundown along the shores of Scotland, I am proud to think they burn more brightly for the genius of my father"*.⁸ If you want to know more about Scottish lighthouses you can do no better than read Bella Bathurst's marvellous book — *The Lighthouse Stevensons* (Harper Collins, 1999).

Loch Buie

Loch Buie⁹ is a wide-open bay with wonderful sandy beaches, rock pools, a castle, highland cattle, a medieval chapel and a stone circle. All surrounded by low mountains and a horizon out to Colonsay. And yet it is not much visited by boats, maybe in part because obviously the wind has to be from the north.

Castle Moy¹⁰, a 15th century tower house, is more-or-less on the beach, and is being restored by Historic Environment Scotland and was wrapped up in scaffolding when I was last there. If they do as good a job as they did on Gylen Castle then there is a treat in store. Just below the castle is a double row of boulders which was once a boat landing, and then further out beyond the stream is a curved row of boulders put there it is said either as a fish trap or to make some sort of artificial anchorage.

Walk round by Laggan beach to the east of the castle to St Kenneth's Chapel (Caibeal Mheamhair)¹¹, a small late-medieval church in a group of trees. It was converted into a mausoleum by the MacLeans of Lochbuie in the 19th century and then restored in the 1990s when I presume the vulgar coloured glass was put in the roof — rather kitsch. The font is medieval, made from Carsaig sandstone.

⁷ https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:Lighthouses_built_by_Stevenson_family

⁸ Robert Louis Stevenson, 'Memoirs of Himself', book 1, p. 149, in *Memories and Portraits, Memoirs of Himself, Selections from his Notebook* (orig. 1887; London: William Heinemann, 1924).

⁹ <https://lochbuie.com/>

¹⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22392/mull-moy-castle>

¹¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22395/mull-lochbuie-caibeal-mheamhair>

Lochbuie House is Georgian with an Edwardian bit struck on the west end, with a rather nice bow-fronted gable. It is owned by Jim Corbett whose family run the estate. And do walk behind it to find the stone circle¹² in a field, fairly complete but with quite low stones and a couple of outliers. What were these things for? We don't know. I think this circle is probably the only example within reach of the anchorages in the area.

Keep going west to find The Old Post Office¹³ which is now a coffee/tea shop, and an outlet for local produce (and crafts), as well as ready-made meals (01680 814153). Flora Corbett opened it in 2012. It has irregular hours as you can tell from the sign on the door:

"OPEN Most Days About 9 or 10. Occasionally as Early as 7. But SOME DAYS As Late as 12 or 1. WE CLOSE About 4 or 5, But Sometimes as Late as 11 or 12. SOME DAYS OR AFTERNOONS, We Aren't Here At All, and Latterly I've Been Here Just About All The Time, Except When I'm Someplace Else, But I Should be Here Then, Too."

The capitals are hers, not mine. You pay into an honesty box.

The stone pyramid just outside commemorates the Coronation of King Edward VIIth and his lady wife, Queen Alexandra, in 1902, 'Erected by Lochbuie and his Highlanders', no doubt emphasising non-Jacobite credentials. Not far away is St Kilda's church¹⁴, Victorian 1876, very small, cluttered, Episcopal.

Loch Don

Keep your eyes down and this anchorage looks and feels more like an east coast of England river than a Scottish loch, but look up and the distant mountains are a bit of a give-away. Capt. Harvey liked the place in 1935: "*This is a good little anchorage in about 9 feet, the bottom being sand and rock covered with weed. It is best to anchor just inside the point and opposite the small ferry pier, where a lugger is sometimes hauled up, and not to go southward of the point as the bay is foul close in*".¹⁵ The pier is a lovely and remarkably well-preserved structure, as is the slipway. A few yards away on the rocks you might think there is an Atlantic seal with her pup, but in the summer this is hardly likely. Look closer and you will see it is a rather lifelike sculpture, made out of cement I think. The ferry house and ferry cottage are both for rent, so any local population here must have long gone. A grand spot to view the Firth of Lorne and the entrance to the Sound of Mull.

¹² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22385/mull-lochbuie>

¹³ <https://www.oldpostofficelochbuie.co.uk/>

¹⁴ <http://www.mull-historical-society.co.uk/churches/churches-2/st-kildas/>

¹⁵ Sailing Orders. Practical instruction to yachtsman, illustrated by the author's cruises on the West Coast of Scotland. Capt J R Harvey, Alexander Maclehoose, 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.

Loch Spelve

An impressive and rather mysterious entrance, rather less sporting now the rock has been marked. That rock is in fact much closer to the shore than I used to think in the days when you had to guess where it was. And once inside the loch, you are as safe as houses — there are so many places to anchor depending on the wind direction. Ignore the extensive mussel farms which may look bad but do employ local people and the product tastes pretty good.

Most people seem to aim for the northwestern arm where there is wood for a barbeque and a short walk up to a lovely lochan hidden by the trees. To get there, cross the deer fence and scramble up along the burn through the trees. There is a bit of a path along the north side of the lochan which changes to a track which comes out on the road. Turn right and in 200 yards there is a sign back to Loch Spelve — a rather nice round-trip with butterflies, dragonflies and water-lilies.

If you have time, and it's calm, anchor temporarily off Rubha na Cille, just inside the entrance to the loch on the northeast side, close inshore of the mussel farm. Go ashore and follow the west side of the burn for a few minutes up to the isolated and very ruined parish church of Killean¹⁶ which you can see from the loch. It is medieval, abandoned in the 17th century. I couldn't find much in the autumnal bracken, just an enclosed burial ground with maybe 20 sad gravestones, mostly 19th century. So best to go in the spring before the bracken grows up, there would be a much better chance of seeing more, and there may be quite a lot more to see, even 14th century stuff if it is still there.

Port Donain

A quiet spot for a quiet day, more a lunch-stop to off-load the kids on to the small grey sandy beach (one of the few sandy beaches around these parts). Mind you there are rocks to avoid before the beach so it can be tricky to land, maybe better to the south of the burn that comes tumbling down past a ruined house. But there is a bit more to this bay than meets the eye. Up the hill to the right of the main beach you will find the remains of a chambered cairn¹⁷, and a bit further on the remains of a kerb cairn¹⁸ with perhaps a fallen standing stone. For the more adventurous, walk north under the cliffs to find a spooky cave, with bones probably, and grand panoramic views up towards Loch Linnhe, Ben Nevis and across to Ben Cruachan. If you do stay the night, there is plenty of wood for a barbeque.

Rubh' Ardalanish

The usual anchorage is to the west of Ardalanish point where there are two small bays, so if there is a boat in one when you arrive, anchor in the other — both are very attractive. The water is crystal clear, clear enough to watch crab battles under the boat. Apparently in settled weather Ardalanish bay east of the point is OK, but it must be very shallow, albeit with a

¹⁶ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22647/mull-gualachaolish-st-johns-church-and-churchyard>

¹⁷ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22649/port-donain-mull>

¹⁸ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22648/port-donain-mull>

tempting looking beach. But this is nearer Ardalanish farm¹⁹ which has a fine reputation for their weaving. Otherwise it is quite a walk, up the shallow valley to the northeast from the two small bays where you will find an abandoned village (sad when you think about it), then bear right up the hill and aim for Scarba in the distance, through a gate and across some bog to the right of a plug of rock, and on to the farm track (not very easy to find your way). As well as farming, there has been tweed weaving here since 1987, using wool from the farm's sheep (and other sheep too). It is a delightful place. There is a shop selling the wool, tweed, blankets and rather posh clothes, as well as the farm's beef and lamb. And coffee and ice cream. You can look round the old looms too. Wise to take your credit card. In the meadow outside there are corncrakes. A right-on sort of a place. In 2011 it all came up for sale but the new owners — Anne and Andrew Smith — are carrying on the weaving tradition (ph 01681 700265).

Tinker's Hole

Although this anchorage has been described as looking like a quarry full of water, it is a quite delightful place. The pink granite seems to glow even when the sun isn't shining, and on a hot still summer day it is a blissful place to be. You could do with two bits of equipment — snorkelling gear and some climbing shoes. The snorkelling is an obvious activity, and there are some neat little climbs on the granite boulders, particularly at the head of David Balfour's Bay which is a short walk over the hill, or you can anchor there.

Indeed, walking ashore really makes the best of this anchorage because the views are so attractive from looking down on ones boat tucked secretly away, to the vistas across the sound of Iona one way and to the Paps of Jura the other.

The old observatory²⁰ at the top of the hill on Erraid used to be for communications with the Dubh Artach²¹ and Skerryvore²² lighthouses. It is unlocked and there is a bench, and a couple of windows to gaze out of and imagine yourself watching out for the lights before the days of radio.

The anchorage just to the north of Eilean Dubh is just as good as the Hole itself, if not better because it keeps the setting sun for longer. Just north of here again is a tiny island with a wee sandy beach — perfect for the children. And loads of seals, and an otter. So inflate the dinghy and explore.

For the apostrophe nerd, I have no idea if Tinker's Hole should have an apostrophe or not, nor where. And nor does anyone else as far as I can see. What the hole has to do with tinkers seems obscure.

¹⁹ <https://ardalanish.com/>

²⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/121526/mull-erraid-lighthouse-shore-establishment-observatory-and-signal-station>

²¹ http://www.bellrock.org.uk/stevensons/stevenson_erraid.htm

²² <https://www.nlb.org.uk/lighthouses/skerryvore/>

Tràigh Gheal (white beach)

Now here is a treat revealed by the Antares charts, but not in the sailing Directions (yet). Miles from anywhere accessible from the land, a fabulous beach, good for a barbeque and just generally enjoying the view. There is a narrow track leading up the hill by the burn but it is a very long way before it meets a road. Of course it is absolutely not a place to be in heavy weather from the south.