

Colonsay

Last updated February 25th 2022



Colonsay¹ is the land of the McPhees or Macfies or of the various other spellings of the same clan name. From the east side of the island, the Paps of Jura seem ever present, and the light is fabulous which must explain why there are so many paintings of this view (indeed I have two). In 2022, the island had a population of about 130, but there were fewer than 30 people under the age of 50, and only four children in the primary school. It is very much a holiday destination depending on tourism, as well as on farming. And we are talking Waitrose- not Lidl-man judging by the over-large SUVs and BMWs lined up at the ferry terminal in Oban (many people I know have rented a cottage here, or several different cottages over the years, including me). This is not too surprising given that the estate² has about 20 properties to rent (which seems a bit excessive for the size of the local population, and in stark contrast to only nine

social housing units and the dire lack of affordable housing). However, it is a lovely island with many sandy beaches, a good hotel (closed in winter), a bookshop, a ruined priory, and lots of walks. There are not that many anchorages and the main one at Scalasaig is not that wonderful, but there is a good alternative in the next bay to the south — Loch Staosnaig.

There is a folk music festival³ in September but you have to book early as places are limited — it could be a bad time of year for sailing, so go by public transport if necessary. You could even try Hebridean Air Services⁴ which has scheduled flights from Oban, albeit with a very limited

¹ <https://colonsay.org.uk/>

² <https://www.colonsayholidays.co.uk/the-island/the-estate/563>

³ <https://ceolcholasa.co.uk/>

⁴ <https://www.hebrideanair.co.uk/>

timetable. Amazingly, there is a book festival too⁵, in April. Finally, if you want to hire a bike, contact Colonsay Bike and Board Hire (ph 01951 200479)⁶.

Balnahard bay

This must be the perfect beach for children — loads of sand, rock pools, and sand dunes. And very few if any people because it is three miles from the nearest road. It may not have the surf or grandeur of Kiloran but unlike that beach it is protected from the prevailing winds from the west. Over the sand dunes and up a track just to the south of west, in about half-a-mile by a modern barn, you will find the remains of a 13th century cell or chapel dedicated to Saint Catherine of Alexandria (whoever she was)⁷. But you have to be seriously addicted to such things to make the trip worthwhile because in truth it is just a pile of old stones, plus a very worn stone cross. There is an ancient burial cist right by the barn in a small fenced-off area. Better, I reckon, to just take the sun on the beach and admire the view from the Outer Hebrides past Mull and the Firth of Lorne to Jura.

Kiloran Bay

This must be one of the best sandy beaches in the whole of the Inner Hebrides, but because it is accessible by road (well, sort of, hardly the M8) you won't often have it to yourself. In any event it has to be very calm to get rid of the swell that makes landing from the dinghy tricky. As if to emphasise the swell problem you may well see surfers floating about ready to catch a wave, in which case don't take the dinghy — swim ashore instead. It is a great beach for children for sure, and on a hot calm sunny and warm day it is definitely worth a stopover if not a detour. At the north end of the beach, where the golden sand of most of the beach turns to grey, you will find some rather good caves in what I presume is igneous rock; — they extend quite a way, so take a torch. Apparently they sheltered people of the Azilian culture⁸ in about 6000 BC

Oronsay, Caolas Mòr

Reserve this lovely spot for a hot summer day, definitely don't come on a bad day. There are any number of anchorages to choose from. If you pick your timing right there will be very few people around on the island because they can only walk across from Colonsay itself at low water. The beaches round the anchorage are stunning with plenty of machair (dunes) to act as wind shelters, and there are great views of the Paps of Jura. In any photograph on a sunny day it would look like Greece or the Caribbean, the giveaway being that the grass is green and not brown. Behind the dunes is one of the best of so many places for Hebridean flowers: tormentil, bog asphodel, birdsfoot trefoil, eyebright, heathers, orchids and all the rest. Marvellous! Picnic or barbecue, or both. We celebrated my eldest son's 8th birthday here, the first year we had Calypso in 1988.

⁵ <https://www.colonsaybookfestival.com/>

⁶ <https://www.colonsaybikesandboards.co.uk/bikes/>

⁷ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38168/colonsay-balnahard-cill-chaitriona>

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Azilian>

Then take a walk up to the 14th-century Augustinian Oronsay Priory⁹ — a remarkably well-looked-after ruin for such a remote place so far off the ecclesiastical tourist trail. It stands on the site of a much earlier 6th century monastic foundation, with the usual — for these parts — St Columba connection, real or imagined. Indeed, the island's name comes from St Oran (or Odhran), an Irish friend of St Columba who accompanied him to Scotland.

The present buildings are mostly 14th and 15th century. They fell into disrepair in the 17th century. The Victorians did some repairs, in particular of the west arcade of the cloister, the east gable and extension to the church (with the McNeil tombs), and the Prior's House which contains some very fine 15th and 16th century graveslabs solemnly stacked up round the walls (no guide to who was who anymore I think). In a small chamber off the south wall of the church you will find a stone recess with human bones, something to scare the children.

Just to the west of the church stands the late 15th century Oronsay cross, one of the finest high crosses in Scotland. The cross to the east is much smaller and more weathered — it is a combination of an Oronsay school 16th century cross head with a 14th to 15th century Iona shaft.

The adjacent farm buildings look rather good, privately owned and currently tenanted by the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds who are dedicated to saving the corncrake and red-billed chough. The island was bought and the farm restored by an American couple in 1984 — Ike and Frannie Colburn (his mother was Scottish which probably explains why). The whole island is designated an SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest).

Jane Smith has written and illustrated a rather charming book about the Oronsay wild life: 'Wild Island, a Year in the Hebrides', Birlinn, Edinburgh, 2016. And even earlier, in 1887, Mrs Frances Murray — American, suffragist and early feminist, married to a rich Glaswegian lawyer — wrote a splendid book for her friends about her long and adventurous family holidays based in the long-disused and partially ruined Oronsay House on the island. She was clearly posh, rather patrician, tough too, and she seemed very sympathetic to the local islanders¹⁰.

Port Mòr

I have not myself anchored here but once you find your way in through the skerries I am told it is very protected. The bookshop was once the main reason to visit but it moved to Scalasaig in 2012. The Colonsay and Oronsay Heritage Trust¹¹ is up the road in the old Baptist Church. Presumably they and the Colonsay website spell Oronsay with two rather than with one 'a' because it is named after St Oran, but most people and the OS map go for Oronsay — the 'ay' bit means island in Old Norse. I have yet to visit. And nor have I visited the nearby 18-hole golf course¹² — not my game at all. There is an honesty box. Apparently the course is over 200 years old.

⁹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37822/oronsay-orsay-priory>

¹⁰ Summer in the Hebrides, Sketches in Colonsay and Oronsay. James Maclehose & Sons, Glasgow, 1887.

¹¹ <http://www.spanglefish.com/ColonsayandOronsayHeritageTrust/index.asp>

¹² <https://colonsay.org.uk/things-do/golf>

The Kilchattan graveyard up the road is nothing very special, in the middle are the ruins of a 14th century chapel.

Scalasaig and Loch Staosnaig

There may not seem a lot to choose between these two anchorages, but they are very different. Either you can go for convenience and tie up to the pier and roll around with everyone else in the swell that sets into the bay at Scalasaig (and pay for the privilege) or, just around the corner, there is an easy anchorage in Loch Staosnaig (or Queen's Bay) from where it is a 20-minute walk to the hotel (head up the hill on a narrow path to the right of the signs for the electricity cable). This latter anchorage has a delightful sandy bay with a beach that dries out a long way at low tide, ideal for children to mess around on. Above half tide it's good for swimming and snorkelling around the tidal islet. If you don't fancy the water then you can just look at the view of the Paps of Jura. But, dear oh dear, moorings are planned for the faint hearted who won't/can't anchor. Time to move somewhere else! Or, as they may be quite a long way out, anchor inside them.

Two hundred yards from the Scalasaig ferry pier (original bit 1850 with roll-on roll-off extension in 1988) is a convenient and quite well-stocked shop, but being an island you cannot always get bread or fresh milk — but nor do you have to tolerate the horribleness of a large Tesco. Right by the pier, the Pantry_(ph 01951 200325)¹³ is a great place for home-baked cakes, real coffee and I believe fresh bread if you order it. It does lunches too, and dinners but not every evening. In 2021 it doubled its indoor space with a modernistic prefabricated box that arrived on the island in two pieces. Unfortunately this has substituted the view of the pier from the garden, with the view of the pier from the dining tables. Also just by the pier there is an art gallery¹⁴ in the old waiting room, with attractive craft items.

Up the road from the pier is the 18th century Colonsay Hotel¹⁵ (original building circa 1750). To make my hackles rise, it has been rebadged as 'The Colonsay', and in some quarters is regarded as a 'boutique' hotel — it is a bit unclear exactly what clientele it is aiming at. However, honour redeemed, it is friendly to children and sailors, it has a bar, and a nice enough restaurant with gastro-pub food (ph 01951 200316). In 2021 it was up for sale, offers over £650 000.

Beer was brewed on the island since 2007, you could get it on draft in the hotel. It was said to be the most remote brewery in the UK and I can well believe it, but no longer — the beer is now brewed in Alloa (the original brewery is now into the modern fashion of distilling gin)¹⁶.

The parish church¹⁷, earlier than many still standing at 1801-4, is nicely perched on a mound opposite the hotel, but close-up it is not all that interesting, either inside or out. Except the pewter baptismal font hinged on a rail is worth a look. Although originally designed for 400 'sitters', the regular congregation is now down to a dozen or less, so there are real problems

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

¹⁴ <https://www.balnahard.com/seapinkgallery>

¹⁵ <https://www.colonsayholidays.co.uk/hotel/>

¹⁶ <https://thegincooperative.com/gin-maker/colonsay-beverages/>

¹⁷ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37934/colonsay-scalasaig-scalasaig-parish-church>

with the upkeep. For example, in 2015 they were trying to raise £60 000 to stabilise the belfry, maybe grants and crowd funding will do the trick. I am in no way religious but it is very, very sad to see these historic and reassuring buildings going downhill. Apart from castles, they are more or less the only physical remains of our history.

Finally, miracle of miracles, there is a bookshop¹⁸ next to the gin distillery. The opening hours are limited so phone ahead — 01951 200320. They have a collection of new and second-hand books, majoring on Argyll, but also covering the rest of the Hebrides and Scotland, with some children's books thrown in. There is even a local publishing company, the House of Lochar¹⁹. Long may it live, although I believe it is not taking on any more new titles. And there is a book festival²⁰ in the spring.

I imagine the two-and-half mile walk to Colonsay House (which is private) would be good, but I haven't done it. Its gardens²¹ sound fine, and there is a café, but not open every day, so check (ph 01951 200211).

¹⁸ <https://colonsay.org.uk/shops-food/bookshop>

¹⁹ <http://www.houseoflochar.com/index.htm>

²⁰ <https://www.colonsaybookfestival.com/>

²¹ <https://www.colonsayholidays.co.uk/the-island/gardens-cafe/565>