

Loch Sunart

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Loch Sunart can sometimes be something of a disappointment, at least the upper part, maybe because it tends to be the place to retreat to when the weather is too inclement to go north round Ardnamurchan, or around the west side of Mull. There are not that many official anchorages, while the road along the north shore may only be a single track but somehow it is intrusive. And, of course, the wind tends to blow either up or down the loch, so one way or another you will be tacking unless you are very clever with the forecast. But, and it is a big but, the loch is incredibly beautiful, and sailing on flat water in a brisk breeze is a delight. There are wonderful deciduous woods on either side, not too spoilt by pine plantations — yet. I suspect there must be a number of rather lovely occasional anchorages along the much more remote south side. But I feel this is a great place for walking, mountain biking and camping, not so much for attractive or interesting anchorages.

Ardnastang Bay

Not a lot here. Just an old ruined slipway, some woods with noise from the road above, and maybe something of a beach over in the northeast corner. Too far to walk to Strontian. However, there is an interesting bit of local history. In the mid-19th century a 400-seat floating kirk (in truth a corrugated-iron shed) was built for and used by breakaway members of the Free Church because the local landowner refused to allow them to build a church on his land. A few years later the shed was driven ashore in a storm and any remains must have all now rusted or been taken away. However, in 2016 one of its anchors was found on the seabed in the bay, and there are plans to display it in Strontian.

Camas nan Geall (Bay of Strangers)

I know not why this is not included in the Sailing Directions. On a calm day with northerly weather it is superb, a wide-open bay looking over towards Tobermory. The single-track road above the bay is far enough away not to be obtrusive, and anyway there is not much traffic, at least not out of the holiday season. Ashore there is a somewhat sandy beach, OK for sand castles, and behind that a well-tended field with sheep. But not just sheep. Over the centuries the farmers have kept away from and have now enclosed an 18th century burial ground with a couple of interesting head stones and even a standing stone on which is carved a Christian

cross, and also some trees surrounding a broken-down chambered cairn¹. These, along with scattered domestic ruins, give the place a sad sort of a feeling, but the views are not to be missed — on a good day of course. There is an iron-age fort on the headland to the southwest which I have not got to yet.

Carna West Kyle

This is another place called 'Dòirlinn', Gaelic for a tidal causeway or island. The one cottage was a ruin for years but is now being restored. In the 19th century it was an inn, and it has also been a shop, a school, a holiday centre for school children, and a private house. Near the shore, hidden in the bracken on the path up to the cottage, is the first of some remarkable cast-iron milestones indicating the miles to Drimnin, 6¾ miles along a Land Rover track. Presumably there was once a significant community here. This track makes an attractive walk through deciduous woods along the shoreline to Loch Drumbuie². After that the track goes up over the treeline and passes the remains of villages which were cleared in the mid 19th century — Sornagan, Portabhata, Auliston and Carraig.

Eilean Garbh (rough island)

This ought to be a nice anchorage but you can hear the traffic on the main road above, and presumably you can even be the object of interest from the public hide on the shore when the wildlife spotters tire of otters, herons and seals. So no sex on the foredeck please, nor even in the cockpit — these people have serious binoculars. It is actually well worth going ashore by the hide, which is a very well-built and attractive structure, and then taking a stroll along the well-signed and made path to the southeast, about 15 minutes, through very pretty regenerating woodland

Glenmore Bay

Although this bay is, by Hebridean standards, a bit industrial with some sort of operation down by the shore (wave turbines I am told), and by the main(ish) road, there is one thing to see. Set up by the well-known Scottish photographer, Michael MacGregor, it is the privately-owned Ardnamurchan Natural History Visitor Centre³ (from the pontoon, up the hill, turn left at the main road, 10 minutes). The fixed CCTV cameras are particularly good — one is under water in the local burn to see trout, but may now be out of action. And there is an underwater view of a pond too. They clearly major on eagles — golden and sea. The coffee, lunch and tea café does the usual things (chocolate cake etc) and the shop also does the usual things (tea towels, gem stones, photographs). The audiovisual show of Ardnamurchan uses Michael MacGregor photographs to good effect and the music is nice, but there seemed to be dirt on the screen when I was last there. In fact it is all looking a bit tired, not quite as good as I remembered from earlier years. However, it was taken over by new owners in 2016 and I am told things are looking up and may not be now quite as I have described them. Great if true. Go and see for yourself, and I will too.

¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22350/camas-nan-geall-cladh-chiarain>

² <http://www.heritagepaths.co.uk/pathdetails.php?path=70>

³ <https://ardnamurchannaturalhistorycentre.com/pages/frontpage>

Kilchoan

Kilchoan Bay⁴ is a pleasant spot with a small scattered population, and with I suspect a considerable proportion of holiday, incomer and second homes. It is the most westerly village on the mainland of Great Britain and until about 1900 was only accessible by sea. There is a CalMac ferry to Tobermory which might possibly be helpful for crew changes.

About a quarter-of-a-mile from the slip to the right, behind the old manse which itself is a fine restored house surrounded by beautiful mature trees — the back part is 1790 and the front part was added in 1830 — is the ruin of the Old Ardnamurchan Parish Church⁵. This was built in the 18th century. It is surrounded by a lovely old graveyard overlooking the Sound of Mull where, maybe 20 yards from the south wall of the church, there are a couple of Iona-School graveslabs, casually lounging in the turf. They must have been lying around here for 600 or so years and so far have not been carried off to be put on display somewhere else. The 'new' Parish Church is early 19th century, about a quarter-of-a-mile further on. The garden is trim, the trees lovely, and the three galleries and pulpit are nice (but I think it is now closed for 'health and safety' reasons).

More or less opposite is the Kilchoan Hotel⁶, originally an 1870 shooting lodge, for a drink, and they do meals, but I have not tried it recently (ph 01972 510 200). Definitely give it a try.

Liddesdale

A quiet spot, tucked under the woods with a burn rushing through an arched bridge to the sea. There seems to be a well-restored holiday let here, along with a rather large ruined house and a barn. The road along the shore goes to nowhere much, so OK for a stroll.

Camas na h-Airbhe (the bay of the walled enclosure)

Pretty good shelter here, satisfactorily remote — but rather blighted by a very large fish farm. Never mind, it provides employment, although at the expense of pollution and also probably of the wild salmon population. Locally it is known as 'Invasion Bay', because during World War 2 it was used for amphibious landing exercises.

Although the eye is drawn to the dense plantation of pines, the bay itself is fringed with nicer deciduous trees and so there is plenty of wood for a barbeque, and good for a bit of a wander about. Someone obviously thinks you might get lost here — there are signs on a track up a bit from the anchorage warning you that you are in a remote area. Indeed you are, so don't get lost!

Loch Drumbuie

Loch na Droma Buidhe (loch of the yellow hill) — commonly known as Loch Drumbuie — is an intriguing but over popular anchorage, not surprisingly as it has long been known as "*an*

⁴ <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/kilchoan/kilchoan/>

⁵ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22130/kilchoan-old-parish-church>

⁶ <https://kilchoanhotel.co.uk/>

*extraordinary good place to ride in"*⁷. If you want to get away from the crowds of Tobermory it's not bad but maybe there are better alternatives. However, it is ideal for windsurfing or dinghy sailing because there is no way you can get blown out to sea! Otherwise there is not a lot to 'do' here. The southwest corner has a suitable rocky beach for a barbeque with plenty of wood lying around, and the deciduous woods along the south shore and up the hill are lovely. I am not sure why this loch is such a very popular anchorage — maybe because it is near Tobermory but is not Tobermory, or maybe because it has a fascinatingly narrow entrance (Caolas nan Conn, strait of the dogs), but I guess mostly because it is very well sheltered from all wind directions.

One can get to the track between Drimmin and Doirlinn, easiest from the anchorage about half-a-mile inside the loch on the south side, and take the very nice walk to the West Kyle of Carna and a view of Loch Teacuis. Or walk the other way, up the hill and westwards to explore the abandoned villages of Sornagan, Portabhata and, almost hidden in the forest, Auliston. Sornagan is the nearest, found on the lefthand side of the burn as you go up the hill, a collection of four ruined houses, one quite big. They were only occupied for the first half of the 19th century. How people survived here is hard to imagine, quite a way from the shore for easy fishing and no obvious ground to till. All were 'cleared' in the 19th century.

Loch Teacuis

This loch is seriously tricky to get into. There are not just one but three critical points which all require serious concentration on pilotage, if you take the east side of Carna. Ignore the chartplotter and follow the Sailing Directions I reckon, and best at low water neaps when you can see most but not all the dangers, and it is not too shallow. Of course nowadays, with Antares charts on your phone, there is less of a problem. On my first visit, I managed to avoid the rock at the south end of Caol Charna on the way in, and so pleased was I with myself that I then hit it on the way out — hubris before nemesis. My co-owner had done exactly the same some years earlier so I felt OK about it. I have never attempted west of Carna which is said to be even trickier.

This area is remarkably remote but even so there are some houses scattered around the innermost section of the loch, plus some small boats on moorings. Once over 100 people lived round here, now almost none.

There are tracks along each side of the loch, good for walking. On the south side you come to the Barr River, and if you follow the track a short way upstream you will find the abandoned village of Barr. On the north side there is a most attractive, mostly 19th century big house — Rahoy⁸ — with a wonderful metal sculpture of a stag by the waterside, by Helen Denerley⁹. You can rent the house, sleeps 15, £3-4000 per week.

⁷ Murdoch Mackenzie, *Nautical Descriptions of the West Coast of Great Britain from Bristol Channel to Cape-Wrath* (London: 1776). These are the very first 'Sailing Directions'. Mackenzie was an Orcadian cartographer and hydrographer, and the first to produce recognisable charts of the seas around the British Isles while working for the Admiralty. You can find many of the charts on line at the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. Mind you, some of his metrics for distance would strike one as quaint. For example, the rock in Canna Harbour now incorporated into the pier he described as being "*about a pistol shot from the shore*".

⁸ <http://www.rahoy-estate.co.uk/>

⁹ <https://helendenerley.co.uk/>

A bit further along the small road to the south, past some very undistinguished holiday cottages, on a small knoll covered with oak trees, just before a house called Carnliath and a sign 'to the office' you will find a very rustic broken down chambered cairn¹⁰. No signs, no excavation, rather magical, sitting there for a few thousand years. Moss-covered stones. Do not be intimidated by being told to go away, which has happened here. In Scotland you have freedom to roam as long as you do not wander into someone's garden, cause any damage, or get too close to a private house.

Serpulids, tube-like shells containing colonies of red and orange worms forming coral-like reefs, were found in the upper basin of the loch in about 10ft of water in 2006. There are very few other places in the world where you can find them, one of which is Loch Creran. Fortunately hardly any boats come here to anchor and the beasties are not in a normal anchoring area anyway. So presumably the reefs will remain more or less undisturbed. Unfortunately, in 2015, silly attempts were made to close off the whole loch to yachtsman instead of designating a few areas for anchoring as in Loch Creran — not good. Thankfully resisted successfully.

Mingary Bay

Mingary Bay is a nice anchorage when the wind is not in the south, and very well placed for wandering up to take a look at Mingary Castle¹¹ rooted to its rock in an amazing position commanding the north entrance to the Sound of Mull and Loch Sunart. It was started in the 13th century and then altered in the 16th, 17th and again in the 18th centuries before falling into disuse in the mid 19th century — not so very long ago. Although it was besieged a few times, there was a lot of castle left, but for years it was not possible to get into it. However, the Ardnamurchan estate¹² has now restored it, at I imagine considerable expense, and turned it into a high-end luxury catered establishment with five rooms accommodating up to 10 guests. If you book ahead as a non-resident (ph 01972 614380) you may be able to get dinner at £80 per person.

Surprisingly, in front of the entrance across the rock-cut ditch lying in the grass, there is — or was — a very large old cannon. Before that it had been spotted under the castle by the sea. Where did it come from? The castle or one of those Spanish Armada ships that was meant to have fetched up around here? It is now more suitably relocated on the castle terrace.

Oronsay

Sailean Mòr, the gut on the north side of the island, can be a quiet spot, away from the crowds in Loch Drumbuie. But it seems crowded if there is more than one boat at anchor. The island is difficult to get around because of the wild vegetation but the walk up to the ruined cottages is worth a go — you can see them from the anchorage, on the west side of the gut. There is at least one black house (with the curved corners) and one white house (with windows, and generally much better built). I have no idea what the story of this island is, maybe it is too obscure for anyone to know much about it. But, once again, the population was 'cleared' by the end of the 19th century.

¹⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22471/rahoy>

¹¹ <https://mingarycastle.co.uk/>

¹² <http://www.west-highlands.co.uk/index.php>

Salen

The situation in Salen Bay was much improved in 2010 when new owners took over the pier. There are now pontoons¹³ as well as moorings. In 2014 there were new toilets, showers, a shop and a small tearoom. Someone is being very busy here.

However, I must confess I have not in the past been an enthusiast for this place, rather put off by warnings of horrible things on the seabed ready to trap your anchor, and by the fact that all around the inlet appears to be private so there is nowhere to go ashore except at the pontoons (mind you the slipway is a Thomas Telford construction from 1820, so stop to admire). And there seemed little to do except walk along the main (by Ardnamurchan standards) road. However, the Salen Hotel¹⁴ is I am told by several people a whole lot better than it was a few years ago when I was last there, and very recommended for a meal (ph 01967 431661). So, in truth, not a bad place to pull in if you are looking for a pontoon or mooring in a northerly gale, with dinner ashore.

If you are prepared to leg it for three miles along the road towards Strontian, you could visit the Resipole Studios¹⁵ — a very nice-sounding gallery which I have not been to, showing contemporary Scottish art. But check the opening times before you start walking (ph 01967 431506). Maybe you can anchor off Resipole bay, at least temporarily, I am not sure.

Strontian

What a strange place Strontian¹⁶ is, a 1960s village, the centre of which is about a mile from the anchorage. But at least it doesn't try to pretend to be what it isn't, and in fact it all seems rather together, tidy and pleasant. I wonder who was responsible for the plan and the way the whole place is laid out. There is a standing stone in the car park, later named the Pillory Stone because it was used to shackle villagers found guilty of gossiping — very strange!

The whole area has loads of history as a lead mining centre in the 18th and 19th centuries and, of course, with the story of the discovery in 1790, and then isolation, of strontium (by Sir Humphry Davey) in 1808.

There is a play-park and a small but well-stocked supermarket in the centre, a café and a very nice small pottery and craft shop selling things made locally — Woodland Pottery¹⁷. The trees are great, and there is a community woodland trail around the edge of the village.

The Strontian Hotel¹⁸ built in the early 1800s looks attractive, does meals and is near the anchorage (ph 01967 402029). Kilcamb Lodge Hotel¹⁹ and restaurant (ph 01967 402257)

¹³ <http://www.salenjetty.co.uk/>

¹⁴ <http://www.salenhotel.co.uk/>

¹⁵ <https://resipolestudios.co.uk/>

¹⁶ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strontian>

¹⁷ <http://www.woodland-pottery.co.uk/>

¹⁸ <https://www.thestrontianhotel.co.uk/>

¹⁹ <https://www.kilcamb Lodge.co.uk/index.php>

looks rather posh, is further away, and I have not been there but it seems worth a visit; it seems to have loads of awards.

The Strontian Agricultural Show takes place in August, followed by dancing.