

Loch Melfort and Loch Shuna

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*"In the land-locked waters of Shuna Sound and loch, and Lochs Melfort and Craignish, the most beautiful scenery and easy sailing can be enjoyed with safe anchorages all about, and tides for the most part mild."*¹. Frank Cowper got it absolutely right over a century ago. Like Loch Craignish, these two adjacent lochs are pretty rather than dramatic, well sheltered, and with quite a lot of anchorages to dot around in.

Ardinamir Bay

A peaceful spot but not the same since Irene MacLachlan² had to leave her cottage overlooking the bay in 1992, and move into a nursing home where she died at the age of 87 in 1997. This indomitable lady lived alone, with MacKelvie her cat, and no electricity. She maintained a keen interest in all the boats coming to anchor in the bay, indeed one was expected to sign her visitors' book (the nine volumes are now with the Clyde Cruising Club), and have a cup of tea.

¹ 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,

² <https://www.heraldscotland.com/news/12285045.irene-maclachlan/>

She had binoculars by the window to keep a very sharp eye on what was going on, with particular and gleeful attention to any boats that went aground at the quite tricky entrance. Very appropriately, she was made an honorary life member of both the Clyde Cruising Club and the Royal Highland Yacht Club. Libby Purves put it well in 'One Summer's Grace', the lovely book she wrote about sailing round the UK with her young family in the late 1980s *"Record keeping, faithful down the years, has made a plain old farming spinster with a keen eye and a satirical grin into something approaching a tribal matriarch"*³. Now Irene's house is spruced up and looks like a holiday home, complete with satellite dish.

It surely worth the short walk to the top of the hill, not so much to inspect the rather nondescript pile of stones which was once an iron age hill-fort, Dun Ballycastle⁴, but for the truly spectacular view — from Loch Melfort, to Shuna, to Scarba, to the Fladda lighthouse, to the mountains of Mull and across to Clachan Seil. Stunning.

Asknish Bay

There are two excellent things to do here. Visit Arduaine Garden, and eat — no, dine — in the Loch Melfort Hotel.

The garden⁵ was started in 1895 by James Arthur Campbell who had bought the land and named it Arduaine (pronounced Ardoonie), meaning green promontory, which is exactly what it then was — bare land. He also built the house which became the Loch Melfort Hotel in 1965. As usual for the West Coast, the success of the garden depended on planting numerous trees as a windbreak. The trees are magnificent. Now, tucked away in their shelter at the bottom of the rocky promontory, are some very pretty water-gardens connected up by tiny tinkling streams. A stone heron presides over one of the larger ponds. The garden belongs to the National Trust for Scotland who took it over in 1992 from the two Wright brothers. In 1965 they had rescued and greatly improved the garden after the Campbell family could no longer keep it going. Sadly, in 2009, the Trust looked as though it was going to close the gardens because of its financial difficulties, a threat temporarily withdrawn almost at once, and in 2011 reversed altogether — closure would have been a travesty and a lot of us Trust members made a big fuss. There must be better ways to save money, and their rather conservative fuddy-duddy image should be sharpened up.

The hotel⁶ has laid some very convenient moorings in the bay but if there is a lot of southerly weather you may have to anchor round the north side of Rudh'Arduaine in North Asknish Bay where the moorings these days do not belong to the hotel, but are tempting nevertheless. There is a small jetty and a farm track steeply up the hill to the hotel and garden.

The hotel advertises itself as having the best view in Scotland, and this may well be true if you avert your gaze from Craobh Haven, that ghastly pastiche of a Scottish fishing village. And don't look too hard at the hotel itself which when it started as the Loch Melfort Motor Inn added the

³ My favourite sailing-round-Britain-book has to be 'One Summer's Grace, a family voyage round Britain', Hodder and Stoughton 1990, by Libby Purves, particularly for her observations about small children on boats.

⁴ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22618/luing-ballycastle>

⁵ <http://www.arduainegarden.org/>

⁶ <https://www.lochmelfort.co.uk/>

very ugly 'Cedar Wing' to the side of the splendid Edwardian House. They were presumably trying to ape the American concept of a motel because with car parking next to your bedroom door this is exactly what it looks like.

Calum and Rachel Ross, who took over in 2009, are extremely accommodating and helpful, the hotel is very child and pet friendly with a small outdoor play area, and the food is excellent — definitely worth a detour. Not surprisingly it has twice won the Scottish Independent Hotelier award. You can eat in the hotel dining room but may feel more at ease in your sailing clothes in the Chartroom Bistro and Bar which sadly lost the charts on the walls some years ago — the charts on the blinds are not a good substitute. Personally I find the Bistro a bit of a dull space, the dining room is far preferable for a relaxed evening, maybe because I j like the deep couches and open fire in the lounge where one can peruse the menu over an apéritif (ph 01852 200233).

Balvicar

This seems a rather messy, scrappy sort of place with little to do. It is not as attractive as the other 'slate villages' hereabouts, like Cullipool and Easdale. There is no pub, hotel or even café but there is a general store. And a family-owned boatyard which could come in handy (ph 01852 300557). There is an interesting looking 9-hole golf course⁷ if you are into that sort of thing — the Isle of Seil Golf Club. And out of the village to the 'main road' turn left and left again, there is a quite nice graveyard with some old slabs and a very small bit of a medieval church — Kilbrandon old parish church⁸.

Craobh Haven

I'm afraid I find this place a sad and bleak 1980s pastiche of a Scottish fishing village. Just to embellish the awful architectural mishmash, the houses are set too far back from the sea from which they are separated by a car park which makes matters even worse. Even sadder when one reads Cowper who in the late 19th century described the pre-marina anchorage as "*a perfect little port*"⁹. And in 1923 the first Clyde Cruising Club directions called it a '*snug anchorage*'. Alas no more. If only those houses could be replaced with some low-level, imaginative modern architecture, and the car park grassed over and landscaped.

So there seems rather little to commend Craobh as a place, although the marina¹⁰ itself is fine I am told, well used too, and very prettily situated if you keep your back to the car park and admire the view (ph 01852 500222). And, as has been pointed out to me, the alternative to the marina might have been an ugly sprawling fish farm which would bring in far less local employment. Be grateful for small mercies.

The Lord of the Isles¹¹ pub is large and open plan, so not particularly cosy, but the views are attractive. The food is definitely good pub grub, the ale is real, and the staff friendly (ph 01852

⁷ <https://www.1golf.eu/en/club/isle-of-seil-golf-club/>

⁸ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/22600/seil-kilbrandon>

⁹ Cowper. Ibid.

¹⁰ <https://www.craobhmarina.co.uk/>

¹¹ <http://lordoftheisles.co.uk/>

500658). And in 2019 it won the Catering Scotland Pub Excellence award. It has now opened a shop which sounds helpful. There was once a general store in the village itself until it closed down in 2010 (unsurprising as hardly anyone actually lives there, although I am told that those that do are really trying to make the place work). There is a small craft shop — The Giving Tree. Riding stables¹² are close by for those that way inclined (ph 07590 023515).

Betjeman's "*Come friendly bombs and fall on Slough to get it ready for the plough*" comes to mind. However, I really must go back on a warm summer's day and try again to like this place, I know it does have its fans. Indeed one emailed me in 2018 "*What an appalling and trite review of Croabh!...Your review drips with profound discourtesy and rudeness and I think you should be ashamed of yourself*". And Shane Spall in 'The Princess Martilda Comes Home' thought it "*has to be the loveliest marina in the country*"¹³. So I definitely will try to try again. In the meantime be aware there are strong views on either side of the argument.

If you want to park yourself in a nearby marina rather than anchor, then Ardfern has more on offer ashore although it is further in from the open sea if you are just passing by — both Ardfern and Kilmelford Yacht Haven have boatyard facilities.

Cuan Sound (the Sound of the Ocean)

Surprisingly calm water here, just as it was in the late 19th century when Frank Cowper threw down his anchor in a panic after dicing with an adverse tide in the Sound itself — but there are now houses unless you go on further in to seek complete solitude. Not much to do ashore, probably best to sit in the cockpit and admire the view. And pour a stiff gin and tonic if like Cowper in 1896 you "*..look back upon this little adventure as one of the most unexpected and trying I ever had to encounter in all my cruises*"¹⁴

Fearnach Bay

Melfort Pier and Harbour¹⁵ has nice 1980s architecture which blends in very well, but somehow it's all a bit sterile, maybe because it is entirely a holiday development of up-market self-catering houses (particularly suited to the disabled which is good to see). Now I believe some are being sold off as private homes. Maybe in a couple of hundred years this place will have a local population and some character, or it will be as much a ruin as the black houses. It is perhaps worth a look if you are passing this way.

About 15 minutes along the road to Kilmelford, past Melfort House¹⁶ which is younger than it looks (1960s) and is now run as an excellent B&B with dinner, you will find Melfort Village¹⁷, a timeshare development constructed from the ruined 19th century gun-powder factory on the River Oude. Tennis court, indoor swimming pool, spa, playground, and snooker table are

¹² <https://www.lungaridingstables.co.uk/>

¹³ The Princess Matilda Comes Home by Shane Spall, wife of actor Timothy, is charming and funny — a delightful read. Ebury Press, 2013.

¹⁴ Cowper. Ibid.

¹⁵ <https://www.mellowmelfort.com/>

¹⁶ <https://www.melforthouse.co.uk/>

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

among the attractions for the residents. There is a restaurant which re-opened in 2019 as The Room at the Top Restaurant and Bar, open for non-residents (ph 01852 200345)¹⁸. I have not tried it but the omens are good. Or, you could walk the two miles into Kilmelford where you will find the village shop, and the Cuilfail Hotel¹⁹ which does meals and has real ale in a cosy bar. The hotel may give you a lift if you call them on 01852 200274. There is also a riding centre at Melfort Village if you want a change from sailing (ph 01852 200311).

Kames Bay

This may be a reasonable anchorage but there really is nothing to do here, and it is too near the main road with traffic noise. There are far better places hereabouts to explore, like Shuna or Ardinamir.

Loch na Cille

You can pick up a Kilmelford Yacht Haven²⁰ mooring here, and they have a good reputation for fixing things on boats, as well as having toilets and showers and so on (ph 01852 200248). The village of Kilmelford with the Cuilfail hotel²¹, restaurant and cosy bar with real ale (ph 01852 200274), is I reckon a bit too far to walk, only a mile maybe, but along a main road with no pavement. You might get a lift from the hotel if you phone them. Better, the Yacht Haven may take you free of charge. The village has a shop. Otherwise not much to do.

North Asknish Bay

The activities here are exactly the same as for Asknish Bay — where you anchor just depends on the wind direction.

Poll na Gile

The anchorage in this small, very sheltered and wooded bay on the east side of Shuna is tucked in behind the fish farm, which does rather detract from the view. But at least it is quiet and away from the crowds in Craobh Haven across the loch to the east. The vegetation is quite dense ashore so not much point in walking anywhere, typically lush Argyll — and there is nothing particular to see. But a good place to collect dead wood for a barbeque.

Shuna Island

The only official anchorage on Shuna²² is the bay at the north end of the island although there must be other places too, like Poll na Gile. Nowadays there is just one farm and one family

¹⁸ <https://www.melfortvillage.co.uk/resort/restaurant-and-bar/>

¹⁹ <http://www.cuilfail.co.uk/>

²⁰ <https://www.kilmelfordyachthaven.co.uk/>

²¹ <http://www.cuilfail.co.uk/>

²² https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Shuna,_Slate_Islands

with six cottages for holiday lets²³ — remarkably each one comes with "a 17 foot aluminium-hulled open assault craft with a small outboard motor"! There does not seem anything very specific to see and do on Shuna Island (don't confuse this Shuna with the Loch Linnhe Shuna). From the north anchorage, where there is a decaying hulk to inspect, you can walk through rather difficult terrain of bog, bracken and bushes to Shuna House, an Edwardian wreck, with collapsed ceilings and mouldy furniture — hardly worth it really. It's just a mess, not even mentioned in 'Pevsner'. The roof is still on and so I suppose some rich person might make something of it before it is too late. There are adjacent farm buildings, with a dog. Otherwise Shuna is a place to wander around, or just to sit and admire the view from the cockpit.

Toberonochy

Another of the slate villages, not so extensive as either Easdale or Cullipool, but with just the same sort of early 19th century quarriers' cottages spread around the bay and village green. There are no what you might call 'facilities' here in the way of a pub or café, indeed there are none on the whole Island of Luing²⁴, apart from the Atlantic Islands Centre at Cullipool. Unfortunately, the only primary school is down to one pupil even though the local population is about 200. But do get off your boat and walk up to the ruined, possibly 12th century Kilchattan Chapel²⁵ and graveyard, past the impressively large 1850s farm buildings. There you will find some authentic — so it is said — pre-reformation graffiti on the outer walls of the chapel depicting sailing ships along with some apparently meaningless geometric shapes. There is also an interesting plaque commemorating the Helena Faulbaums, wrecked on Belnahua in 1936.

²³ <http://www.islandofshuna.co.uk/>

²⁴ <https://isleofluing.org/>

²⁵ <https://ancientmonuments.uk/127120-luingold-parish-church-of-kilchattan-800m-north-west-of-toberonochy-oban-north-and-lorn-ward#.YeFmwBPP02I>