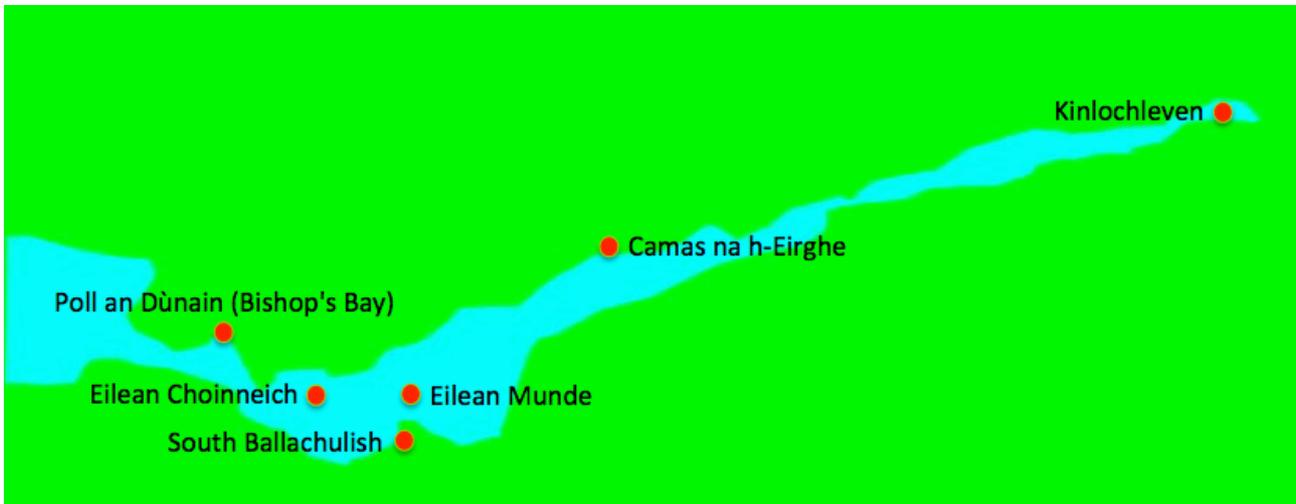


Loch Leven

Last updated 2nd March 2022



Describing Loch Leven, the 19th century Admiralty Sailing Directions strayed into purple prose: *"Probably in no part of the world, certainly not throughout the Western Highlands, is Loch Leven surpassed in magnificence of natural scenery, containing, as it does, all that tends to charm the eye or inspire the mind. Mountains of surpassing grandeur, with wooded base and sterile summits, surround its shores, their deep shadows increasing in intensity the naturally sombre waters of the loch, whilst Glencoe, ever dark and gloomy, seems still more so as one recalls the frightful tragedy enacted within its recesses"*. Glencoe is indeed a magical name for anyone in to mountains. One might then imagine that Loch Leven, at the bottom of the glen, has a lot to offer the yachtsman. It doesn't really, apart from the pleasure of sailing amongst well-remembered and magnificent mountains, and admiring them from a different angle. The views and the scenery are grand indeed, and although there are rather few anchorages to explore, one is spectacular, at least in what there is to see and do — Eilean Munde.

Camas na h-Eirghe

The big attraction since 2006 is the Loch Leven Seafood Café (more a restaurant I would say)¹, four miles east of the bridge on the north shore of the loch (ph 01855 821048). There are free moorings for customers. It has definitely classy food, and is not inexpensive. The seafood platter is so enormous that it could easily be shared by two, not a bad plan. There is also a small shop selling their ultra-fresh shellfish, and various deli delights, which is part of the same rather friendly operation. And a coffee shop too. In 2011 it was Scottish seafood restaurant of the year. A must for the gourmet sailor.

¹ <http://www.lochlevenseafoodcafe.co.uk/>

Eilean Chonneich (Kenneth's Island)

I don't think there is much point in trying to get ashore, better to stay on the boat, drink in hand in the cockpit, and admire the grand surrounding mountains. Slightly spoilt by noise from the main road on the south shore of the loch.

Eilean Munde

This is one absolute must, not that there is a particularly safe overnight anchorage, but a stop is essential. Forget about the view of the grim Isles of Glencoe Hotel, ignore the noise from the road, and just take in the mountains all around — and definitely land on the island. Its name comes from St Fintan Mundus of Argyll, an Irish disciple of St Columba. Talk about atmospheric, and photogenic. This little island is not just a wonderful place to view Loch Leven from, with beautiful broadleaf and pine trees. But it has tombs, loads of tombs, being the traditional burial place for the people of Glencoe. The tombs lie scattered all around, mostly from the 19th century up to about the 1970s. Many stones are upright and easy to read, some have fallen down, and others are slabs lying on the ground. There is a 16th century ruined chapel² too, abandoned in 1653 and very overgrown. So just sit amongst the wild flowers and breathe in the scene, in April it is awash with celandines. Curiously this place is not mentioned in 'Pevsner'³, maybe because you need your own boat or somebody else's boat to get to it.

Kinlochleven

It takes some persistence — which I have never achieved — to sail right up to the head of Loch Leven to find yourself at Kinlochleven⁴, hardly the most attractive village on the West Coast although the mountains around about are stunning. Apart from scenery, and saying you have done it, there seems not much point in sailing all that way.

The village was built in the early 20th century to house the workers at the hydro-powered aluminium smelter. The alumina was brought in by sea. The smelter closed in 2000 and the site is now derelict, although the power station is still working. If you want to discover more then check out the Aluminium Story Visitor Centre which has a small but informative display. This whole place rather reminds me of Sheffield, on a smaller scale of course: industry arrives in a beautiful part of the country, a population grows up to service it, industry leaves, and the dwindling population then struggles to reinvent itself, here at the very time the village had been bypassed by the building of the road bridge over the entrance to Loch Leven in 1975. This reinvention has taken the form of an outdoor pursuits centre with one very remarkable feature — the world's largest indoor ice climbing wall. The rest is not really worth the effort for the boatie, although it probably is for the thousands of walkers who pass through here on

² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23541/eilean-munde-st-munds-chapel>

³ '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 are Argyll and Bute by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and Highlands and Islands by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

⁴ <https://www.kinlochleven.co.uk/>

the West Highland Way⁵ — the not very exciting pub, the boarded-up shops, dull domestic architecture and locked churches.

The Ice Factor⁶ may look closed-up and a bit down-at-heel in one of the old aluminium plant buildings, but inside you will find not just the 12-metre ice wall but an ordinary climbing wall too, a bouldering wall, a café and a bar. A rather good place for a wet day where you can get climbing instruction too. Outside there is an enormous aerial adventure structure which I have not seen in action, look at the video. Too old to try it myself.

If you fancy a nice walk, take the track south of the river up to the Blackwater Dam⁷ which was built to power the smelter. Just before it you will find the lonely 'Graveyard of the Unknown', with mostly nameless concrete headstones marking the graves of the 22 men and one woman, out of about 3000, who died building the dam — without machinery⁸.

Poll an Dùnain (Bishop's Bay)

Just through the bridge, which is much newer than it looks having opened in 1975, this anchorage is a nice spot alright (apart from the domineering orange house). But, because there are a lot of private moorings, it is very difficult to anchor, almost impossible in the summer. With any luck there might be a free private mooring.

North Ballachulish⁹ is hardly an attractive village but in a small complex of craft enterprises just by the Loch Leven Hotel, you will find the F.W.Holroyd Art Gallery¹⁰, established for over 100 years but only in this location since the early 2000s (ph 01855 821277). Also do visit Starfish¹¹ — Dave Shepton and Davey Todd (who once built boats) make more lever harps than anyone else in Scotland (also known as Celtic harps or clarsachs). You will find these master craftsmen just behind the art gallery where they are more than willing to show you around their workshop, and sell you a harp (or electric violin, viola or cello if that is your fancy).

The Loch Leven Hotel¹² is prettily situated above the old ferry slipway, presumably it was much busier and touristic before the bridge was opened (ph 01855 821236). You can best walk to it along the foreshore, definitely not along the road. The attractive path starts by the small isthmus joining the islet of An Dùnain in the south west corner of the bay to the mainland. En route take a turn round the islet to find the cup marks¹³ on a rock by a metal post, facing south. These are prehistoric¹⁴ and notwithstanding the effort that must have gone into carving them out of the rock their function is unknown.

⁵ <https://www.westhighlandway.org/>

⁶ <https://www.ice-factor.co.uk/>

⁷ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blackwater_Reservoir

⁸ <https://cameronmcneish.wordpress.com/2014/02/01/hills-of-the-dead-end-remembering-patrick-macgill/>

⁹ <https://www.undiscoveredscotland.co.uk/balachulish/balachulish/index.html>

¹⁰ <https://www.holroydgallery.co.uk/>

¹¹ <https://starfishdesigns.co.uk/about-us/>

¹² <http://lochlevenhotel.co.uk/>

¹³ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/23548/north-ballachulish>

¹⁴ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cup_and_ring_mark

New owners took over the hotel in 2013, escaping from an Edinburgh law firm (check out the legal tomes in the library). Sprucing the place up, launching a nice website, they are much in evidence and seem to be doing very well. They have added a library dedicated to Scottish literature and books about Scotland (most encouraging), nice prints on the walls, a gin and rum distillery, and 50 varieties of gin as well as real ales — something for everybody, and child friendly. And the food is good.

South Ballachulish (Baile a'Chaolais, Village of the Narrows)

Tying up to the pontoon below the architecturally desperate Isles of Glencoe Hotel¹⁵ (ph 01764 651843) is a bit like coming to rest in a slate quarry, which of course is exactly what this once was, indeed most of Ballachulish¹⁶ was. But I am told a better bet is half-a-mile to the east where you will find visitor moorings off the Glencoe Boat Club¹⁷ and a loading pontoon with water and power (a donation is expected).

Behind the not at all bad information centre and café in the village you can walk round the very impressive old slate quarry which started production in the late 17th century, and dwindled to nothing by 1955. And ponder on the whereabouts of all the slate that once came out of this place — slates from here and the Easdale area must have roofed most of Scotland until recently (now it is all dull uniform foreign slates from Spain, China and other countries). Roofers can easily tell the difference between these two types of slate. A small track to the left towards Glencoe leads in a few minutes to a rather remarkable slate arch built in 1822, now in the care of Historic Environment Scotland. Slate from the quarry was transported over the arch to the shore, and so on to boats for export, before the railway arrived in 1903.

The unexciting village has a very good Co-op, and a hardware store. And The Laroche¹⁸, a rather nice restaurant which caters as much for children as for adults who want a good meal by a Michelin star chef — particularly note the very classy desserts (ph 01855 811940). And there is a bar.

The mountaineering-minded could quite easily do the splendid Ballachulish Horseshoe, but that would take most of the day. The golfers might like to try the Dragon's Tooth 9-hole course, now with the rather dull and Surrey-like name of 'Woodlands'¹⁹, but it is a bit of a walk along the main road to get there (walking I am told is what golfers enjoy).

You can get a meal and a drink in the Isles of Glencoe Hotel, and maybe a bath too if you ask — there is a small swimming pool which might do instead. And there is an adventure playground for the kids just up from the pontoons, with a nice view of Eilean Munde surprisingly close, close enough to see the gravestones if you know what you are looking for.

¹⁵ <https://www.islesofglencoe.co.uk/>

¹⁶ <http://www.ballachulish.org/>

¹⁷ <https://www.facebook.com/glencoeboatclub/>

¹⁸ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/category/British-Restaurant/The-Laroche-Restaurant-and-Bar-942031679150347/>

¹⁹ <https://www.woodlands.scot/golf-course/>

This is not a wildly attractive place to stop for the night, too much noise from the very busy road is a minus, but then there are not many safe anchorages in the loch and this is one of them, and it is a good place to stock up.