

Islay

Last updated February 25th 2022



Anyone who knows anything about whisky has heard of Islay¹, even if the only bottle of Islay whisky they have ever seen was in airport shops. There are nine Islay single malts, all but two distilled on the coast, going anticlockwise: Bruichladdich, Bowmore, Laphroaig, Lagavulin, Ardbeg, Caol Ila and Bunnahabhain. An inland operation started distilling at Kilchoman in 2005, the first Islay distillery to be built for 125 years, and then Ardnahoe in 2018. For myself I don't like the peaty taste of most Islay malts, but luckily for Islay there are a lot of people who completely disagree with my taste in whisky.

But far fewer people know exactly where Islay is, and

even fewer have actually been there. It is quite different from the other Hebridean islands, and not at all like the Highlands except in a few corners, having a character of its own — more rural, farmland, more whitewashed houses, more money around judging by the size of some of the houses, more birds although they are more on the land and not so much at sea, and few castles. And at a bit over 3000 or so, the largest island population. The rich farming land on Islay is not a new observation — in the late 18th century Pennant wrote: *"Perhaps it may seem trifling to mention, that some excellent new potatoes were served up at dinner; but this circumstance, with the forwardness of the hay harvest, shows what can be effected by culture in this island..."* Even earlier, in the 16th century Dean Monro described Islay as *"fertile, fruitful, and full of natural grassing, with many grate diere, many woods, faire games of hunting beside every toune..."*²

¹ <https://www.islayinfo.com/>

² Thomas Pennant. *A Tour in Scotland and Voyage to the Hebrides 1772*, Birlinn, Edinburgh 1998, is a surprisingly easy read, far from pompous, and less dated than one might have imagined. He had a real interest in everything he saw from what people farmed and ate, to a bit of history, to the flora and fauna, and more.

Islay has its own brewery³ with five ales. This is particularly good news for Englishmen like myself brought up on proper beer, not caring at all for the sometimes mass-produced Scottish version (there are exceptions like Caledonian IPA, and an increasing number of craft beers). Indeed, after more than 30 years living in Scotland the only things I really miss about England are the pubs with their real ales. Islay has an annual Festival of Malt and Music⁴ in late May, and a jazz festival⁵ in September that should be worth checking out if you happen to be passing.

Although the yachtsman can anchor off every coastal distillery except Laphroaig, the best anchorage has got to be Lagavulin — the entrance is challenging and requires you to keep the 'ulin' of Lagavulin in sight as you approach. You end up right by the distillery and maybe on one of their moorings, the distilling aroma is compelling, and you can easily walk to Ardbeg and get two distilleries for the price of one, as it were.

Ardbeg (Loch an t-Sàilein)

Although you can pick up a visitor's mooring off the Ardbeg distillery⁶ (ph 01496 302244) it is rather exposed and not as attractive as the Lagavulin anchorage. However, there is a delightful walk across the cliffs from Lagavulin where I prefer to anchor or pick up a visitor's mooring (you can walk round by the road which is a bit longer).

The distillery which was started in 1815, and restored in the late 1990s, is definitely worth a visit, particularly for the splendid café which is in an old kiln, and the white painted buildings which are highly attractive. Indeed the buildings were according to 'Pevsner' described by Barnard in 1887 as though constructed "*with no pretensions to taste or elegance, nevertheless...look picturesque and are substantially built*"⁷. Just like they look and are today. The staff are very friendly too, and you can indulge yourself in excellent coffee, lunch or tea. As ever there are tours. Like other distilleries, to get into their website you have to state you are of legal (in the UK) drinking age. How daft, of course anyone can lie about their age. The now deleted home page commented that the distillery was "a worldwide family of Ardbeg aficionados in 90 countries who work tirelessly to drink more Ardbeg"! Didn't sound too good in this day and age of concern about alcoholism.

Bizarrely, Ardbeg has tried maturing their whisky in the orbiting International Space Station. They claim it tastes better than the earthbound equivalent. Good for publicity if nothing else.

³ <https://www.islayales.com/>

⁴ <https://feisile.co.uk/>

⁵ <http://www.islayjazzfestival.co.uk/>

⁶ <https://www.ardbeg.com/en-US>

⁷ '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 for these anchorages are Argyll and Bute by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and Highlands and Islands by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

Ardmore Islands

Here is a veritable archipelago of little islands and skerries. The anchorages are quite far from the land but I don't think you really need to go ashore to experience what this magical place offers. Just sit in the cockpit with binoculars, wait and watch. Or paddle about — quietly — in the dinghy. There are always loads of seals around and you can watch oystercatchers, terns, eider duck, shell duck, swans, herons, deer feeding by the water's edge, and on one memorable occasion we saw a family of otters playing close by on the rocks. Ashore there is not much to do anyway, other than stroll around in the bracken. Ardmore house up on the hill looks forbidding, and rather ugly. A small wind turbine has appeared in recent years, tolerable just about — better than a coal-fired power station.

Bowmore

Bowmore⁸ is a long sail in (and out) but worth a visit, maybe most of all for a first-class meal — at a price — at the Harbour Inn⁹ (the dining room and conservatory overlook the harbour, which is no surprise, and there are a few rooms as well). It is an attractive mid-19th century building, very cosy inside (ph 01496 810330). It was taken over by the owners of the distillery in 2014.

The town itself, and it is a little town rather than a large village, is the administrative capital of Islay. It has a better Co-op than Port Ellen, along with a hardware shop, butcher, fish van, a general touristy sort of shop (the Celtic House) which has an excellent selection of books, particularly sticking-in books for small children, and so on.

The town was laid out as a grid in the mid 18th century and is one of the few attractive towns in the area (along with Tobermory and Oban). The mostly 19th century distillery¹⁰ which was founded in 1779 (with tours, ph 01496 810441) dominates the bottom of the main street by the harbour while God dominates the top in the remarkable form of Kilarrow parish church¹¹, built in 1767 and described by 'Pevsner' as *"powerfully architectonic in conception and resolutely urban in its rural setting"*¹². It is indeed a striking round shape, and inside it is beautifully elegant with splendid pine pews, and curved stairs up to the 19th century gallery. The central pillar holding the roof up is wooden although it doesn't look it.

The MacTaggart Leisure Centre (ph 01496 810767)¹³ contains Islay's only swimming pool in a rather nice 1991 conversion of a former distillery warehouse right by the harbour (It is owned by the people of Islay and Jura.). You swim under a curved wooden ceiling and can

⁸ <https://www.islayinfo.com/bowmore.html>

⁹ <https://www.bowmore.com/harbour-inn>

¹⁰ <https://www.bowmore.com/>

¹¹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37655/islay-bowmore-main-street-kilarrow-parish-church>

¹² '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 for these anchorages are *Argyll and Bute* by Frank Arneil Walker, Penguin Books 1992, and *Highlands and Islands* by John Gifford, Yale University press, 2003.

¹³ <https://www.islayinfo.com/mactaggart-leisure-centre.html>

look out to the bay through windows at the end of the 25-metre pool. There is a small launderette there too.

The Lochside Hotel¹⁴ is a less expensive food option to the Harbour Inn, but the dining room looks right on to the harbour and the food is fine — the range of Islay whiskies in the bar is legendary and it seems to be the place for music in the evenings (ph 01496 810244). Peatzeria appeared in 2017, it looks good but have yet to try it (ph 01496 810810).

So all in all not at all a bad anchorage to take a break, and change crew rather than at Port Ellen which, although it has pontoons and is a bit nearer the airport and more convenient for the ferry, is not such a good place to linger in.

Bruichladdich

Bruichladdich¹⁵ village is the distillery¹⁶, built in 1881, and an excellent tour it does too (ph 01496 850190). The distillery had to close down during the two World Wars, went through various owners, and was closed down again in 1993 by Whyte and MacKay. Luckily the distillery was rescued from corporate mothballs in 2000 and became privately owned in exchange for £6.5 million. All the workers had shares in the company, almost everything was done on site with the original Victorian machinery (and nae computers), and their low peat whisky is delicious (the peaty stuff is for others). Well, that is how it used to be until it was sold to Remy Cointreau for £58 million in 2012, and maybe it still is to an extent. How understandable and profitable for the owners and the 60 investors, but how depressing that yet another successful small operation gets swallowed up by a multinational corporate monster. I am of course no businessman so I don't understand these things at all, but I know what I like, and what I don't, and what I am likely to intuitively support. I was once all in favour of this distillery because they sponsored the first Scottish Islands Peaks Race¹⁷ I entered in the early 1990s.

Bunnahabhain

This is sold in the Sailing Directions as a convenient place to wait for the tide south through the Sound of Islay, or as a pause during a journey north. Whatever, I don't think there is much point in blowing up the dinghy because there is nothing much to see ashore other than the rather unattractive late 19th century distillery¹⁸ (with tours as ever, ph 01496 840557). And some equally unattractive houses, mostly rendered grey.

¹⁴ <https://lochsidehotel.co.uk/>

¹⁵ <https://www.islayinfo.com/bruichladdich.html>

¹⁶ <https://www.bruichladdich.com/>

¹⁷ <https://www.scottishislandspeaksrace.com/>

¹⁸ <https://bunnahabhain.com/home>

Caol Ila

This bay is entirely dominated by the distillery¹⁹ and seems to have no merit at all as a place to anchor. Not all distilleries are beautiful buildings, in this case probably because of the rather nasty 1970s architecture which has been added to the ensemble (ph 01496 302769 for tours).

Kilnaughton Bay

It can be more comfortable than Port Ellen to anchor across in Kilnaughton Bay, protected as it is from westerly winds. It has been a bit spoiled by some modern cottages, but the beach is very pleasant to wander along, and the sand is just right for sandcastles. The Carraig Fladda lighthouse²⁰ was built in 1832 — square and stumpy, very much not in the Stevenson style. (If you walk²¹ on just past the lighthouse you come to the so-called singing sands, said to be a delightful beach —Tràigh Bhan.). Up on the dunes there are a surprising number of atmospheric burial grounds. The roofless St Nechtan's chapel²² is late medieval and contains a number of mouldering graveslabs, including one with a rather fine knight in relief.

The military graveyard just to the east of the chapel is remarkably well tended, as these places always are, but contains very few graves. One is of an 'unnamed negro' which is a bit non-PC these days. It is perhaps surprising there are any war graves here, so far it seems from the action, let alone one of a 'negro'. But ships did come to grief around these parts, most notably towards the end of the First World War²³. The British cruise liner the SS Tuscania²⁴ was carrying American troops to Europe when she was torpedoed by a German U-boat in February 1918. Then in October the Otranto²⁵, an armed merchant cruiser, also carrying American troops, collided with another ship and sank. These tragedies are commemorated by the very visible monument on the Mull of Oa, erected by the American Red Cross in 1920.

Lagavulin

Now here is a unique anchorage, once you can understand the Sailing Directions and get through between the two beacons without touching something. If you do have a wee bump, be reassured that you are not the only one — I am another! The anchorage itself is a delightful pool with terns on the rocky islets, views out to the Mull of Kintyre and Ireland, all much enhanced by the white-painted distillery and the decaying castle. To me it will always be the anchorage of my son Oli's boxer shorts which must translate into something nice-sounding in Gaelic — the boy carelessly dropped the dinghy painter from the yacht, immediately stripped off to his boxers, plunged in to rescue the dinghy and ended up with the boxers round his ankles which slowed him down a touch!

¹⁹ <https://www.malts.com/en-row/distilleries/caol-ila>

²⁰ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37631/islay-carraig-fhada-lighthouse>

²¹ <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/islay-jura/carraig-fhada.shtml>

²² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37608/islay-kilnaughton-st-nechtans-chapel-and-burial-ground>

²³ https://www.islayinfo.com/lord_robertson_islay_troopships.html

²⁴ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tuscania>

²⁵ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/HMS_Otranto

The Lagavulin distillery²⁶ began life as an illegal still at least as far back as the 18th century, the present legal distillery was founded in the early 19th century. The product you can buy in every airport booze shop in the world (perhaps not Saudi Arabia). There are formal tours but the men working in the place seem happy enough to give one an informal explanation of the distilling process and a look at the inner works when one goes ashore (ph 01496 302749).

You can easily walk from here to Ardbeg for another distillery, and to Laphroaig²⁷ for that matter, and even on to Port Ellen along the traffic-free South Islay Distilleries Path²⁸.

The mostly 16th century, possibly some bits earlier, Dunyvaig Castle²⁹ is rather more impressive from the anchorage than close up. It was abandoned in the late 17th century. Indeed too close up is discouraged as the ruin is crumbling off its promontory. How our ancestors managed to perch their castles on such small rocky outcrops, guarding important and strategic bits of the coast, is truly amazing. By the way, the shore between the distillery and the castle is full of rubbish so either walk round by the road, or go by dinghy.

The Islay Marine Centre³⁰ opened in 2011 in the bay, very convenient for a chandlery, boatyard, visitor moorings and so on (ph 01496 300129). How such an enterprise is prospering I know not, I haven't had a chance to visit. One can but wish it well.

Laggan

This anchorage is not in the Sailing Directions but it was a favourite of Captain Harvey's in the 1930s. He remarked that the stones on the beach were "*excellent for ballast for the luggers*"³¹. It is in the small bay surrounded by cliffs and hills on the east side of Loch Indaal, half a mile east of Laggan Point, south of Bowmore. I have not been there but the Captain thought it was good for picnics. Clearly it is very open to the southwest.

Loch a'Chnuic

Loch a'Chnuic has nothing of great interest and is right next to the road — not exactly a main road though.

²⁶ <https://www.malts.com/en-gb/distilleries/lagavulin>

²⁷ <https://www.laphroaig.com/en/>

²⁸ <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/islay-jura/three-distilleries.shtml>

²⁹ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/38002/islay-dunyvaig-castle>

³⁰ <http://islay-marine-centre.com/>

³¹ Sailing Orders. Practical instruction to yachtsman, illustrated by the author's cruises on the West Coast of Scotland. Capt J R Harvey, Alexander Maclehose, London 1935. 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.

Nave island

Nave Island I have yet to visit but there are, I am told, the remains of a small rubble chapel³² to be inspected, maybe early 13th century, with a 19th century kelp burners' brick furnace and chimney. Not surprisingly the island is uninhabited.

Port Askaig

Port Askaig³³ looks like an uncomfortable anchorage to me, too much tide and not enough space, so I have never stopped there. However, if you do, the hotel³⁴ sounds OK (ph 01496 840245). There is also a small shop. But in practice it is probably best to let the tide carry on sweeping you up — or down — the Sound of Islay to wherever it is you are heading for

Port Charlotte

Port Charlotte³⁵ is certainly a pretty place, if a rather quiet village. It was founded in the early 19th century as a distillery and agricultural settlement (the Loch Indaal distillery died many decades ago). At one time it was a busy fishing port. There is the excellent Islay Natural History Centre³⁶ in a converted part of the old distillery (ph 01496 850288), particularly good hands-on stuff for children. And the excellent Port Charlotte Hotel³⁷ for tasty bar lunches and suppers, upmarket dinners, and live music (ph 01496 850360) — it also majors on malt whiskies. I have not been to the Museum of Islay Life³⁸ which in 1977 was set up in the newly restored 1843 Kilchoman Free Church, said to be excellent (ph 01496 850358). The lighthouse is a Stevenson, of course, 1869.

Port Ellen

Port Ellen³⁹ is an early 19th century planned village because the laird, Walter Frederick Campbell, wanted to expand employment from just agriculture to fishing and distilling. The first quay was added in 1824 and the lighthouse in 1832. He named the village after his wife Ellinor.

It is the easiest place to flee to on the south coast of Islay, and there are a couple of good shops for provisions (you could stock up in the Co-op), and a hardware store. But, I haven't in the past rated it much as a place to visit — the visitors' moorings were too far out. However, they have been removed in favour of publicly owned non-profit pontoons⁴⁰ within easy reach of what shops there are, but watch out for the shallows beyond those pontoons.

³² <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37472/nave-island>

³³ <https://www.islayinfo.com/portaskaig.html>

³⁴ <https://www.portaskaig.co.uk/>

³⁵ https://www.islayinfo.com/port_charlotte.html

³⁶ <https://www.islayinfo.com/islay-natural-history-trust.html>

³⁷ <https://www.portcharlottehotel.co.uk/>

³⁸ <https://www.islaymuseum.org/>

³⁹ <https://www.islayinfo.com/portellen.html>

⁴⁰ <http://portellenmarina.com/>

There didn't seem to be much in the way of a good eaterie until the Islay Hotel⁴¹ was completely rebuilt and opened in 2011. And then rebranded as 'The Islay' which makes me flinch a bit. Personally I don't like the rather open-plan interior, nor the faux marble toilets, and there are no real ales. But the coffee and cakes were good, and the restaurant has grand views and looks enticing enough to give it a try, which I will one day. Overall, smart not cosy I would say (ph 01496 300109). Then, in 2015, the Sea Salt Bistro⁴² and takeaway opened, a very jolly place seemingly run just by women, and good food too — not cheap (01496 300300).

There is a pub, The Ardview Inn, where the piped music is hellish loud. There is no real ale, nor any food when I went, but the Guinness was good, presumably because Ireland is so close. It seems a bit beaten up, but is certainly friendly.

The beach in front of the town would be OK for kids to muck about on. St John's Parish Church at the far end of the beach is worth a look. Built 1897, it is solid, with shining brass and polished wooden pews.

If you do get stuck here, consider getting the bus to Bowmore where there is more to do and see, good shops, and the swimming pool. Or, hire a bike behind the garage next to the hotel and go on your own distillery tour — Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg all within easy reach. And the route makes a quite reasonable walk too⁴³.

Port Mòr, Glas Uig, Aros Bay

These three anchorages are all very close together and about equidistant from the most interesting place to visit hereabouts — Kildalton chapel and cross⁴⁴. From Port Mòr, where some rather flashy motorboats are tied up to a jetty by a restored boathouse, there is a track. From the other two anchorages you have to strike out round the small hill. The cross is generally regarded as the best free-standing Early Christian — 8th century — cross in Scotland, and who am I to disagree. It is a bit difficult to make out exactly what the carvings represent but on the east side 'Pevsner'⁴⁵ tells me is the virgin and child, Cain slaying Abel, Abraham sacrificing Isaac, and David killing a lion. The late 12th or early 13th century chapel itself is roofless but otherwise reasonably preserved considering it was abandoned at the end of the 17th century. As ever there are mouldering and very old graveslabs, eroded by the elements and the feet of the curious.

Portnahaven

I am not sure about Portnahaven⁴⁶. At the most southwesterly tip of Scotland, and in an idyllic setting, it should be more exotic than it is. Maybe it is too dominated by holiday homes.

⁴¹ <https://theislayhotel.com/>

⁴² <https://www.seasalt-bistro.co.uk/>

⁴³ <https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/islay-jura/three-distilleries.shtml>

⁴⁴ https://www.islayinfo.com/islay_kildalton_cross.html

⁴⁵ Pevsner *ibid*

⁴⁶ <https://www.islayinfo.com/portnahaven.html>

It is certainly deadly quiet, just a couple of rows of pretty cottages above the bay, with some more modern houses behind. However, there is a cosy pub in what looks more like a private house — An Tigh Seinnse⁴⁷ (the house of singing) — with one rather good real ale when I was last there, from the Islay Brewery (ph 01496 860224). The menu looked enticing, rather more than pub grub, but I have not tried it. Reports are good.

The cottages down by the shore were built in the early 19th century as a fishing settlement, and as somewhere for people to live after they had been 'cleared' from their inland homes. There is a basic village shop and post office. The Parish Church⁴⁸ is a so-called Parliamentary Church, to a standard design by Thomas Telford, built in 1828. It is definitely worth a look inside because it is one of the few Telford Parliamentary churches to have retained its original layout. It is said that one of the two doors in the south wall was for Portnahaven locals, while the other door was for people from Port Wemyss across the fields. The high pulpit is set against the south wall in front of two large windows with lovely views, and the interior decoration is calm and sensible. 'Pevsner' hits the nail on the head yet again with his description of "*pristine and prim*"⁴⁹.

I have not attempted to explore the off-lying island of Orsay but I gather there are some interesting things to see — yet another ruined medieval chapel, and a lighthouse.

Out of the tide and out of the swell it is a pretty idyllic anchorage. But on a bad day it is a dire place to get in and out of with the swell breaking on Orsay and the tide running strongly round the rocks, with a lot of swell. Even on a good day it can be quite daunting. It comes as no surprise that the world's first commercial wave energy generator⁵⁰ was sited half-a-mile up the coast at Claddach, now a decommissioned concrete shell.

⁴⁷<https://www.facebook.com/AnTighSeinnsePortnahaven/?rf=649573301745143>

⁴⁸ <https://canmore.org.uk/site/37252/islay-portnahaven-and-port-wemyss-parish-church>

⁴⁹ Pevsner *ibid.*

⁵⁰ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Islay_LIMPET