

Armin's Little Islay Guide

- A personal visitors guide to the Isle of Islay in Scotland -



First draft, published 19 July 2007

© Armin Grewe 2007, no unauthorised sale or reproduction

First draft 19 July 2007

Preface

In late July 1998 I booked a holiday for a week in Scotland. I can't remember exactly why and how I picked Islay as one of the places to visit, it might have been a report in The Independent and an awakening interest in Single Malt Whisky. Whatever the reason was, on a rainy morning in August 1998 I arrived on Islay for the first time.

I have returned to Islay again and again ever since.

At least once a year, the last few years twice a year, I've returned to Islay for yet another visit. Discovering new places, meeting new people, revisiting well-known places, meeting old friends, making new experiences, deepening my knowledge, you name it.

In 1999 I started my first website under www.armin-grewe.com (which is still going strong), information about Islay and travelogues from my visits to Scotland including to Islay are a large part of its content. In 2006 I added a blog about Islay to my collection, not surprisingly it can be found at www.islayblog.com.

As all this information is only available online I thought I should also provide something visitors can easily take with them. Something they can download, print off and take with them on their journey. That's how the idea of "Armin's Little Islay Guide" came to pass.

Now this guide is by no means an official guide to Islay. It's my personal guide. It is to an extent biased by my own preferences, interests and experiences. Nevertheless I hope first time as well as returning visitors to Islay will find it helpful for their visits to Islay.

I would very much appreciate any feedback you might have, be it corrections and updates, be it suggestions for improvements. You can contact me through my websites, all my contact information can be found on my personal website www.grewe.co.uk

I hope you have a great time on Islay!

Armin Grewe

General information

Some general information you might find useful during a stay on Islay or during your preparations for a visit to Islay.

How do you pronounce Islay?

Islay is pronounced 'eye-la'. Try not to pronounce it Izley or anything similar, unless you immediately want to out yourself as a clueless tourist. In any case Islay is the anglicised spelling, the Gaelic version is Ile. And once you've mastered Islay you can try some of the many place names on Islay with Gaelic origins like Kilchoman (hint: the c is silent, i.e Kilhoman), Bunnahabhain or Beinn Bheigeir.

Useful telephone numbers

The area code for Islay is 01496 (when calling from the UK) or +44-1496 (when calling from abroad).

Emergency (Police & Fire)	999
Strathclyde Police (Bowmore)	+44(0)1496-810222
Islay Hospital	+44(0)1496-301000

Islay Tourist Information Centre

The Tourist Information Centre is based in Bowmore at The Square, corner of Main Street and School Street. They can help with booking accommodation, finding out what's on or provide information about Islay.

Tel: +44(0)1496-810254

Fax: +44(0)1496-810363

E-mail: info@islay.visitscotland.com

Visitors Welcome Evening

The Islay and Jura Tourism and Marketing Group runs regular Visitor Welcome Evenings. During the holiday season (typically late April to October) they take place every Monday evening. They take place at various venues including the distilleries and village halls. Check The Ileach or with the Tourist Information Centre where the evening takes place the week you are planning to attend.

They last approximately 2 hours with a presentation about Islay, song and dance by local artists followed by the opportunity to taste a wee dram of Islay Single Malt.

Entrance is free.

Getting there and travelling around

Islay is comparably remote (which I think makes it attractive) and therefore slightly more difficult to get to. You essentially have two options (discounting the options of arriving on your own boat or swimming):

- Fly to Islay
- Take a ferry to Islay

Flying to Islay

I've never flown to Islay myself, so I can't say much about it. You can fly to Islay from Glasgow, there are regular flights offered by Loganair on behalf of British Airways. Early booking is advisable especially at busy times to ensure you get the flight you want.

The airport is located at Glenegedale on the A846 road between Port Ellen and Bowmore. A small cafe/bar is located in the terminal building.

Islay Airport (Highland & Islands Airports Ltd) Tel: +44(0)1496-302361
Loganair (at Islay Airport) Tel: +44(0)1496-302022

Ferry to Islay

The ferry journey takes approx 2.5 hours from Kennacraig near Tarbert to either Port Ellen or Port Askaig on Islay. It is a very nice journey with great views in good weather, it can get a bit rough if it's stormy during the winter.

If you are travelling with your car it is highly advisable to book as early as possible. Some of the crossings do get sold out quite early at busy times, in particular on Saturdays. If you're lucky you might get on when on standby, otherwise you might have to wait until the next day.

Be aware that Kennacraig is a ferry terminal and nothing else, there are no facilities or accommodation at Kennacraig. The closest village is Tarbert.

Port Ellen ferry terminal: Tel. +44(0)1496-302209 Fax. +44(0)1496-302557
Kennacraig ferry terminal: Tel. +44(0)1880-730253 Fax. +44(0)1880-730202

Travelling on Islay

There are many ways of getting around on Islay. If you have your own car you obviously will usually drive yourself, but there is also public transport on Islay.

Driving on Islay

Driving on Islay is much more relaxed than on the mainland, there are no traffic

lights or roundabouts on Islay and traffic jams are almost unknown. Be aware though that the roads on Islay are often not as good as on the mainland, meaning your speed will be much slower than you might expect. Keep this in mind when planning a journey. You'll also notice the 'Islay Wave', a lot of drivers will give a short wave when passing each other.

The main routes are the A846 from Port Ellen to Port Askaig passing Bowmore and Bridgend on the way and the A847 from Bridgend to Port Charlotte passing through Bruichladdich. The A846 also continues from Port Ellen to the distilleries at Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg.

All other roads are single track roads with passing places, including the B8016 (also known as High Road) from Port Ellen to Bowmore, the B8018 from near Bruichladdich to Kilchoman and the stretch of the A847 from Port Charlotte to Portnahaven. Adjust your driving style and speed accordingly.

If you didn't arrive with your own car, car hire is available through D & N MacKenzie Tel: +44(0)1496-302300 or Fax: +44(0)1496-302324

Taxis on Islay

There are times where you might require a taxi, e.g. when going out in the evening and consuming alcohol. Some taxi services are:

- Carol's Cabs +44(0)1496-302155 or +44(0)777-5782155
- Stuart Doyle Rhinns Taxi Hire +44(0)1496-850170 or +44(0)777-1921157

Bus services

There are two main bus routes operated by Islay Coaches operated by Mundell Ltd (Tel: +44(0)1496-840273) on Islay:

- Service 450 runs from Portnahaven to Ardbeg via Bridgend and Bowmore
- Service 451 runs from Port Askaig to Ardbeg via Bridgend and Bowmore

Check locally for the latest timetables.

Once or twice a day route 450 is also covered by the post bus 196.

Where to Stay

Islay has accommodation to cover for most tastes and budgets. During the holiday season and other busy periods (e.g. Islay Festival) I would strongly recommend to book your desired accommodation well in advance.

Hotels

I think general consensus is that the Port Charlotte Hotel (Tel. +44(0)1496-850360) is the best hotel on Islay. I've stayed at it for many years and can wholeheartedly recommend it.

Other hotels are located in Bowmore, Bridgend, Port Ellen, Port Askaig as well as at The Machrie Golf Course

Self catering

There are a lot of self catering places on Islay. The normal rent period is from Saturday afternoon to Saturday morning. Some providers might on occasion offer short lets, especially during the low season. Two places I've stayed at and can recommend are:

Kilchoman House Cottages (Tel. +44(0)1496-850382) on the west coast of Islay near Machir Bay. Very peaceful and quiet in a rural location, very well equipped cottages sleeping 2-6 people.

Sornbank (Tel. +44(0)1496-810544) is located centrally in Bridgend. The Coachman's Flat sleeps 2-4 people and has a nice balcony over the River Sorn. Free WiFi for internet addicts.

Youth Hostel

Islay's youth hostel is located in a former distillery warehouse in Port Charlotte. While I've never stayed at it myself I've been in it and have heard several positive reports about it.

Campsites

There are two official campsites on Islay. One is at Kintra Farm at the southern end of the Big Strand, Laggan Bay. The other is at the Port Mòr Centre (+44 (0) 1496 850441) near Port Charlotte, opened in 2007 with excellent facilities.

Supplies

When on Islay you will probably at some point need to stock up on supplies, be it fuel for your car, be it some sun lotion, be it some food.

Fuel for your car

If you're driving on Islay you'll quite quickly add up the miles and will have to refill your car. Fuel on Islay is more expensive than on the mainland, so you might want to fill up your car before leaving for the ferry. But if you do need to fill up on Islay you'll find petrol stations (or gas stations for American visitors) in:

- Port Ellen (on Charlotte Street next to the White Hart Hotel)
- Bowmore (Jamieson Street, off Main Street)
- Bridgend
- Port Charlotte (next to the Spar shop/ post office on Main Street)
- Port Askaig (next to the waiting area for the Kennacraig ferry)

Be aware that none of them are 24h station as you might be used to from the mainland, most will follow shop opening hours and close by 18:00hrs.

Shopping

In particular if you are staying in self-catering accommodation you might need to know where you can get your (grocery) shopping done. The largest store with the longest opening hours on Islay is the Co-Op in Bowmore. There are further shops in Port Ellen, Bridgend, Port Askaig, Bruichladdich, Portnahaven, Ballygrant and Port Charlotte. A small delicatessen shop can be found at Kilchoman Distillery.

Other shopping options include:

- The local ale is available at Islay Ales, Islay House Square, Bridgend
- Fresh produce is available at the Islay House Community Garden, behind Islay House Square, Bridgend
- Islay Oysters at Craigens Farm, Loch Gruinart (eastern side).
- Islay honey is available from R. Ferguson at 7 Crown Street in Portnahaven

Whisky Distilleries

No visit to Islay would be complete without a visit to at least one distillery. There are currently eight distilleries on Islay with a ninth under development.

The South

There are three distilleries on the south coast, in running order from Port Ellen along the A486 they are:

Laphroaig

Laphroaig has a small visitor centre and offers regular tours, booking is advisable. Friends of Laphroaig can pick up their annual rent.

www.laphroaig.com Tel. +44(0)1496-302418

Lagavulin

Lagavulin offer regular tours by appointment only. Small visitors shop available. Walk out to Dunnyvaig Castle for a nice view over Lagavulin Bay with the distillery.

Tel. +44(0)1496-302730

Ardbeg

Ardbeg have a very nice visitor with a highly recommended restaurant for lunches (The Old Kiln Cafe). Regular tours, booking advisable.

www.ardbeg.com Tel. +44(0)1496-302244

The Centre

There is one distillery in the centre of Islay:

Bowmore

Bowmore distillery has a new visitor centre and shop near the centre of Bowmore. Regular tours, booking advisable.

www.bowmore.co.uk Tel. +44(0)1496-810441

The West

There are two distilleries in the west of Islay, with a third under construction:

Bruichladdich

Bruichladdich distillery in centre of the village of Bruichladdich has a visitor centre with a large shop. Regular very informative tours, booking advisable.

www.bruichladdich.com Shop Tel. +44(0)1496-850190

Kilchoman

Kilchoman Distillery is at Rockside Farm near the west coast of Islay. You might want to combine a visit with a visit to Kilchoman cross and/or Machir Bay. It has a large visitor centre and cafe offering lunches. Several small shops are also at the site. Regular tours, booking advisable.

www.kilchomandistillery.com Tel. +44(0)1496-850011

Port Charlotte

The distillery at Port Charlotte (owned by Bruichladdich) is currently being “rebuilt”. There isn't much to see yet, but you might want to take a look what's happening.

The North-east

There are two distilleries in the north-east of Islay:

Caol Ila

Caol Ila distillery near Port Askaig offers regular tours by appointment only. There's also a small shop. One of the best views on Islay from the still house over to the Paps of Jura.

Tel. +44(0)1496-302760

Bunnahabhain

Bunnahabhain Distillery is Islay's most northerly distillery, reached along a winding single track road with excellent views over the Sound of Islay (Turn off the A846 just east of Keills). Shop and regular tours, booking advisable.

www.bunnahabhain.com Tel. +44(0)1496-840646

Pages still to come...

As this is only a draft copy it is not complete yet. The following pages are currently planned to be added for the first edition:

- historic places
- souvenir shopping
- beaches
- eating out
- walking
- activities, swimming, birdwatching
- what to do on a rainy day
- useful websites

Table of Contents

Preface.....	3
General information.....	4
How do you pronounce Islay?.....	4
Useful telephone numbers.....	4
Islay Tourist Information Centre.....	4
Visitors Welcome Evening.....	4
Getting there and travelling around.....	5
Flying to Islay.....	5
Ferry to Islay.....	5
Travelling on Islay.....	5
Driving on Islay.....	5
Taxis on Islay.....	6
Bus services.....	6
Where to Stay.....	7
Hotels.....	7
Self catering.....	7
Youth Hostel.....	7
Campsites.....	7
Supplies.....	8
Fuel for your car.....	8
Shopping.....	8
Whisky Distilleries.....	9
The South.....	9
Laphroaig.....	9
Lagavulin.....	9
Ardbeg.....	9
The Centre.....	9
Bowmore.....	9
The West.....	9
Bruichladdich.....	10
Kilchoman.....	10
Port Charlotte.....	10
The North-east.....	10
Caol Ila.....	10
Bunnahabhain.....	10
Pages still to come.....	11