

Armin's Little Islay Guide

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



Fourth edition, published April 2009

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First edition published 22nd of July 2007

Second revised, updated and expanded edition published 2nd of September 2007

Third revised and expanded edition published 22nd of May 2008

Fourth updated and expanded edition published 4th of April 2009

For the latest edition please check my website at:

www.armin-grewe.com/islay/printable-islay-guide.htm

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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. December 2008 saw the addition of a daily Islay pictures photoblog at www.islay.org.uk

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 can not guarantee that all information is correct and complete, you will have to use it at your own risk.

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

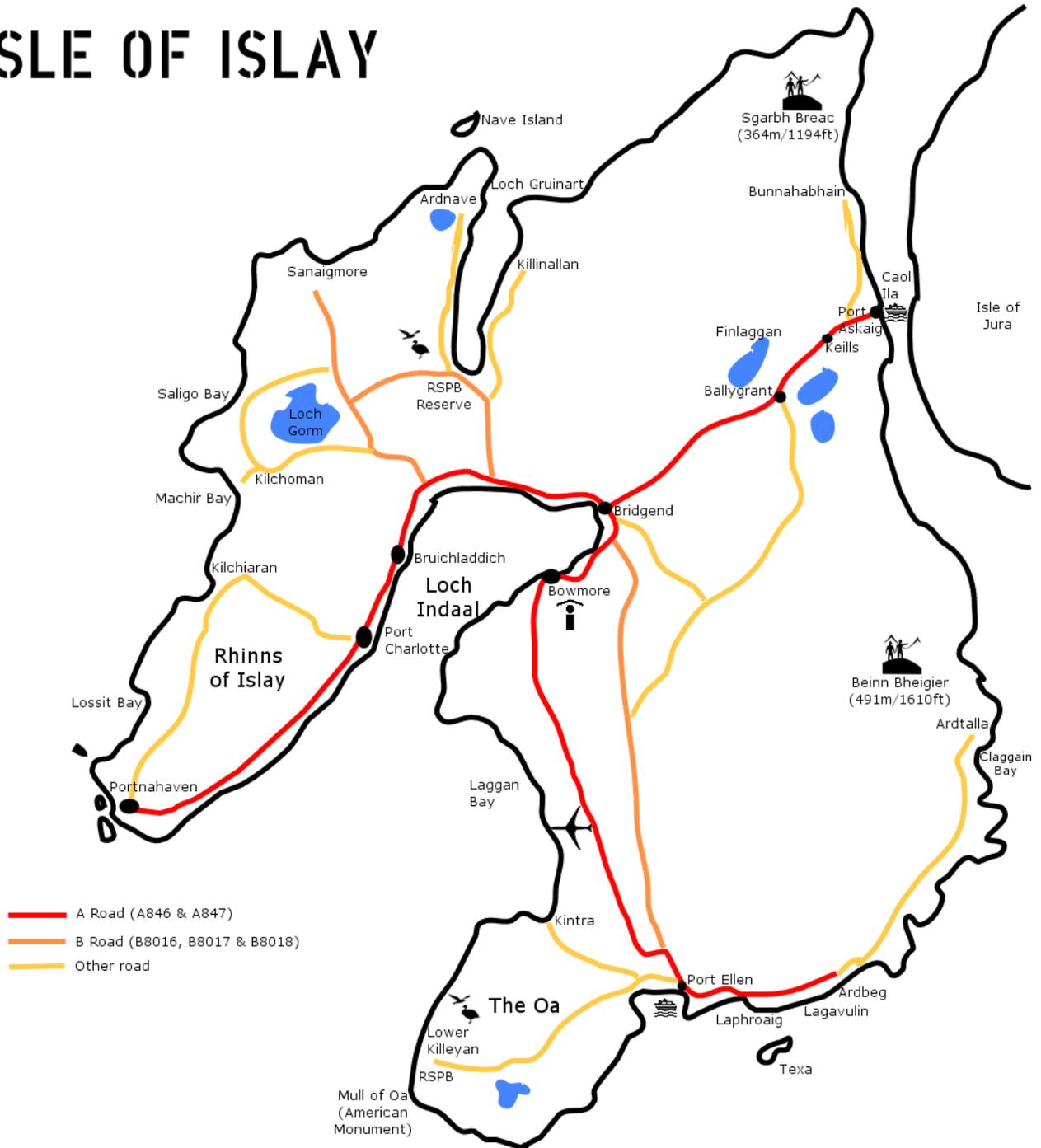
I hope you have a great time on Islay!

Armin Grewe

Overview Map of the Isle of Islay

To help you with some basic orientation here is an overview map showing you the main roads, villages, distilleries and a few other points of interest:

ISLE OF ISLAY



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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). Local numbers beginning with 810 or 301 are usually in the Bowmore/ Bridgend area, numbers beginning with 850 or 860 are on the Rhinns (Port Charlotte), 302 around the Port Ellen and 840 in the north.

Emergency numbers

Emergency (Police, Fire & Ambulance)	999 or 112
Strathclyde Police (Bowmore)	+44(0)1496-810222

Medical Help / NHS GP practices

Islay Hospital	+44(0)1496-301000 (Bowmore)
The Rhinns Medical Centre	+44(0)1496-850210 (Port Charlotte)
Dr Latta, The Surgery	+44(0)1496-810273 (Bowmore)
Dr Knowles, Geirhilda Back Road	+44(0)1496-302103 (Port Ellen)

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

The Ileach (local newspaper)

The Ileach is Islay's award winning independent local newspaper. In addition to the local news it has a very helpful "What's On" calendar/diary for local events on Islay and Jura. One of the best ways to find out what's happening on Islay.

It is published every two weeks on the Saturday, costing 85p. You can buy it at most shops on Islay, if you're arriving with the ferry you should also be able to buy it on the Saturday ferries. Their office is on Main Street in Bowmore, providing further services as well.

www.ileach.co.uk

Tel. +44-(0)1496-810355

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.

Entry is free.

The website for the Islay and Jura Tourism and Marketing Group can be found at www.islayjura.com

The Weather

A lot of people think it always rains in Scotland and therefore on Islay. While it does rain a lot on Islay (otherwise there wouldn't be enough water for all the whisky, which wouldn't be very good) there is also a lot of sunshine on the island. I've had whole weeks where I didn't see a single drop of rain and mostly had sunshine.

In general Islay has a very moderate climate. It rarely snows (and if it does the snow is usually gone after a few hours) and it doesn't get very hot in the summer either. It can get quite windy in the winters though with the big storms rolling in from the Atlantic and ferry crossings being cancelled.

The weather can vary dramatically on different parts of the island, it might be pouring it down with rain in Port Ellen while the sun is blazing down on the Rinns (or vice versa). It can also change quite quickly, from nice sunshine to a heavy shower or the clouds very quickly breaking up after some rain to let the sun through. In other words, be prepared for everything.

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 Flybe on behalf of British Airways. Flights take approx 30min. 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
Flybe (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 only 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. See the next page for further details.

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
- Islay Car Hire Tel: +44(0)1496-810544 or +44(0)7824-665099 (see also www.islaycarhire.com)

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
- Fiona's Taxis +44(0)1496-302622 or +44(0)7808-303200
- Lamont's Taxis +44(0)1496-810449 or +44(0)7899-756159

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 or www.portcharlottehotel.co.uk) is the best hotel on Islay. I've stayed at it for many years and can wholeheartedly recommend it. It's not cheap though, so check your budget before booking.

Its latest competition is the small luxury hotel an taigh-osda in nearby Bruichladdich right next to the distillery (Tel +44(0)1496-850587 or www.antaighosda.co.uk). I haven't stayed here myself yet, but have heard very good feedback about it.

Another hotel I have stayed at is the Harbour Inn in Bowmore (Tel. +44(0)1496-810330 or www.harbour-inn.com). Nice views over Loch Indaal from the lounge and restaurant.

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

All hotels offer full board and are typically open to non-residents for meals.

Bed & Breakfast

There are a variety of bed & breakfast places across the island, check with the Tourist Information Centre for details.

The Meadows Guesthouse (Tel. +44(0)1496-810567 or www.islaymeadows.com) near Bridgend is a brand new B&B opened in 2007. Very nice views and an excellent breakfast are my impressions from a stay in 2008.

I've only stayed in their self catering flat, but I'm also hearing excellent feedback about the B&B at Sornbank (Tel. +44(0)1496-810544 or www.sornbank.co.uk) in Bridgend.

I haven't stayed at it yet, but The Monachs south of Port Charlotte looks very promising and I've heard good feedback from other visitors. (Tel. +44(0)1496-850049 or www.islayguesthouse.co.uk)

Self catering

There are a lot of self catering places on Islay. The normal letting 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 or www.islaycottages.com) 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. An excellent place to stay for birdwatchers, Ian and Margaret are passionate birdwatchers themselves and can give lots of recommendations and advice.

Sornbank (Tel. +44(0)1496-810544 or www.sornbank.co.uk) 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.

If you prefer a really remote location, which doesn't even have electricity, then take a look at Ardtalla Cottages (www.ardtallacottages.co.uk). I haven't stayed at it myself, but I know of people returning to it regularly.

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 visited 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.

On the neighbouring Isle of Jura you'll find an unofficial camp ground (tents only) on the lawn outside of the Jura Hotel. Toilet and shower facilities are available at the hotel.

Wild camping is possible provided you follow the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, i.e. behave responsibly and have minimal impact on the environment and others (see www.outdooraccess-scotland.com for further details).

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, ask in the shop if the station isn't manned)
- Port Askaig (next to the waiting area for the Kennacraig ferry)

Be aware that none of them are 24h stations 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
- For excellent meat I recommend Campbell Butchers at 56 Frederick Crescent in Port Ellen (Tel+44-(0)1496-300480).

Pharmacy

The Islay Pharmacy (Tel. +44-(0)1496-301591) can be found on Main Street, Bowmore. In addition to dispensing prescriptions it also sells alternative health and personal care products.

Banking

Depending on how much money you spend you might need some cash. There are a number of banks on Islay, some also providing a cash machine:

- Royal Bank of Scotland, Bowmore (Tel. +44(0)1496-810555) is on Main Street at the square. Cash machine available.
- Bank of Scotland, Bowmore (Tel. +44(0)1496-810285) is on Shore Street at the corner with Hawthorn Lane. Cash machine available.
- Royal Bank of Scotland, Port Ellen (Tel. +44(0)1496-302314) is on Frederick Crescent near School Street.

Most hotels, guesthouses and shops (incl the distillery shops) will accept credit cards, you will need cash for B&Bs and smaller businesses though. If your card has a chip make sure you know the PIN, as PIN & Chip is now used widely in the UK. If your card doesn't have a chip (in particular if you are not from the UK) you should still be able to use it and sign instead.

Post Office

Even in the age of e-mails and internet you might still want to send a postcard or possibly post a present home. There are a number of post offices on Islay:

- Bowmore Post Office is on Main Street towards the top, near Woodrow Place (Tel. +44(0)1496-810366)
- Port Ellen Post Office is at 66 Frederick Crescent (Tel. +44(0)1496-302382)

Other post offices are available in/near the stores in

- Ballygrant (Tel. +44(0)1496-840656)
- Port Charlotte (Tel. +44(0)1496-850232)
- Portnahaven (Shore Street, Tel. +44(0)1496-860200)
- Bridgend (in Bridgend Stores, at the back, Tel. +44(0)1496-810335).
- Bruichladdich (in Debbie's Minimarket, Tel. +44(0)1496-850319)

Activities on Islay

There's a lot to do on Islay. I will try to cover as much as possible in this guide as far as I feel qualified to write about it or at least give a few pointers for it. I'll start with some snippets and then move to more detailed pages for some activities.

Swimming, Fitness Studio

If the sea is too cold or the weather is too bad you can go swimming at the 25m indoor pool of the Mactaggart Leisure Centre (www.mactaggartleisurecentre.co.uk, Tel. +44-(0)1496-810767) next to the distillery in Bowmore. Other facilities include a sauna and a fitness studio.

On warmer days you might want to consider swimming outdoors from one of the beaches on Islay. Not all are suitable for swimming due to dangerous undercurrents, check the beaches sections for details.

Golf

Islay is famous for its links course at The Machrie, overlooking Laggan Bay. For further information contact the Machrie Hotel and Golf Course (www.machrie.com, Tel. +44(0)1496-302310).

Ron Goudie is the resident PGA golf professional, providing golf tuition, club repairs and islay golf club clothing (www.islaygolfteacher.co.uk, Tel. +44-(0)1496-302567 or +44-(0)7890-101632).

Sailing, Windsurfing and other watersports

If you are an experienced surfer and the conditions are right you might consider trying Laggan Bay with the Big Strand or Machir Bay. In particular in Machir Bay be aware of the undercurrents and know how to deal with them.

Sailing is possible around the island, there are slips in various places, among them Port Charlotte, Bruichladdich and Bowmore. For visiting larger yachts there is a marina in Port Ellen.

For the less experienced or the new starter James of JW Watersports (Tel. +44(0)7748-782949) offers windsurfing and sailing instruction. During the summer months he can usually be found at the beach near Uiskentuie (on the A847, between the B8017 to Gruinart and the B8018 to Kilchoman), watch out for the small advertising board near the road.

On calmer days water skiing is possible around Islay, I have seen it done on Loch Indaal in April. I'm not aware of anyone offering this to visitors though, so you would need to bring your own boat and equipment.

Museum of Islay Life

The Museum of Islay Life (Tel. +44(0)1496-850358) in Port Charlotte gives an excellent overview about Islay's history and life on Islay through the centuries.

The museum is based in a former church in the northern part of Port Charlotte, just opposite the Croft Kitchen restaurant. Among the exhibits are an illicit whisky still, old photographs of Islay, salvaged parts from the many shipwrecks around Islay and a croft room.

More detailed information

See the following pages for

- Birdwatching and wildlife
- Whisky Distilleries
- Historic Places
- Walking
- Beaches
- Eating Out
- Souvenir Shopping

Birdwatching and Wildlife

Islay is famous for its wildlife, in particular its birdlife. There are a variety of ways and places to enjoy it and learn about it:

Birdwatching

Islay is a heaven for birdwatching. I haven't been too interested myself initially, but have started to appreciate it over the last few years. The best starting point are probably the RSPB reserves. There are two main reserves on Islay:

- Loch Gruinart has a visitor centre (Tel. +44(0)1496-850505) and a birdwatching hide. Follow the B8017 for 3 miles, turning off from the A847 between Bridgend and Bruichladdich. Regular guided walks are offered, usually on Thursday.
- The Oa is the second RSPB reserve on Islay. Drive out to The Oa from Port Ellen, park at Upper Killeyan. No visitor centre, but a signposted walk (see also walking). Regular guided walks are offered, usually on a Tuesday.

Other good places for birdwatching (and wildlife spotting) on Islay include

- Loch Gorm and the dunes around Machir Bay. I've seen hen harriers close to the road past Loch Gorm several times. The dunes around Machir Bay are good for spotting choughs, corncrakes can sometimes also be heard in the area
- Loch an-t'Sailein just past Ardbeg is a great spot to see seals and otters as well as various birds. Claggain Bay is another option for various birds.
- Ardnave, in particular the dunes, are a good area to spot choughs and other birds. From either Ardnave or Killinallan on the eastern side of the loch you can also see the seals in Loch Gruinart at low tide.
- Portnahaven is well known for its seal population, you can quite often spot seals sunning themselves on the rocks in the harbour or below the lighthouse on Orsay.
- During the winter months the top of Loch Indaal is an excellent place to see the geese, in particular during low tide. The best time is probably if low tide falls on the afternoon, when they come in to roost.

Birdwatching is possible at any time of the year, late October is probably best for the geese arriving. In spring migrating birds can probably best spotted around May, with corncrakes and other rare birds arriving.

Islay Natural History Trust

The Islay Natural History Trust runs the Wildlife Information Centre (Tel +44(0)1496-850288) in Port Charlotte. The centre provides displays about Islay's wildlife and natural history, there are regular lectures and presentations as well.

Islay Birding

Jeremy Hastings runs Islay Birding (Tel +44(0)1496-850010 or +44(0)774-8687656, www.islaybirding.co.uk) for guided birdwatching and wildlife tours around the island. Full or half day tours are available, early booking is essential.

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. All distilleries can be visited and offer tours in some form, inquire with the Islay Tourist Information Centre or the distilleries for the latest tour times and bookings.

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 recently refurbished visitor centre and offers regular tours, booking is advisable. Friends of Laphroaig can pick up their annual rent and claim their square foot of land. Also a good place to sit at the bay while sipping your malt.

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

Lagavulin

Lagavulin offer regular tours by appointment only. Small visitors shop and visitor lounge available. Walk out to Dunyvaig 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

Historic Places

Islay has a rich history with a number of places worth a visit. These include:

Finlaggan

The former home of the Lord of the Isles, a place with a lot of history. It can be found at Loch Finlaggan, turn off the A846 just north of Ballygrant (signposted). There are two things to do:

- Visit the island (Eilean Mor) in Loch Finlaggan to see the remains of the buildings. Panels explain the buildings and their significance. Access is open at any time.
- Visit the Finlaggan Trust museum and interpretive centre in the cottage above Loch Finlaggan for background and historical information. Check locally for opening hours. Tel: +44(0)1496-810629

Celtic Crosses

Islay has a number of Celtic crosses, two of them stand out and should be visited first:

- **Kildalton High Cross**, carved about AD800, is the only surviving complete Celtic High Cross in Scotland. The cross can be found at the remains of Kildalton Church. Follow the A846 towards Ardbeg, then continue along the single track road towards Ardtalla. The church and cross are on the right after a few miles, watch for the sign to turn off.
- **Kilchoman Cross**, from AD1400, can be found near the ruin of Kilchoman Church. The cross is in the churchyard next to the wall to Kilchoman Cottages.

Cultoan Stone Circle

Islay's answer to Stonehenge and Avebury. Well, not really. It is no match to either, as it is in a fairly bad state, with only 3 of the 15 stones still standing upright, but might still be worth a visit. You can find it on the moorland next to the single track road from Portnahaven to Kilchiaran, approx 4 miles from Portnahaven (past the track to Lossit farm/bay, just before Coultoon Farm, left hand side).

Walking

Islay provides plenty of opportunities for walking. They range from beach walks, short woodland walks to long walks over several hours up to a full day.

For all walks make sure you wear the appropriate footwear (i.e. good walking boots in most cases), have the right clothes (incl rain clothes, the weather can change quite quickly) and the necessary maps and compass (and know how to read/use them).

Guided Walks

For organised walking in a group the best option is the WalkIslay walking week (www.walkislay.co.uk), taking place annually in April. There are also regular guided walks organised by the RSPB (check with the RSPB for details).

Karen Siddall offers guided walks for individuals or groups through Islay on Foot (www.islayonfoot.co.uk, Tel. +44-(0)1496-301584 or +44-(0)7874-602622). She also runs regular Sunday walks, contact her for details.

Walk Suggestions

A few suggestions for a variety of walks. Please note these are only very high level descriptions and several of them require a map and good route planning:

Bridgend Woods

For some nice and easy walking on well maintained tracks try Bridgend Woods. Park at the car park near the gate to Islay House Square and then follow the various signposted walks. Stop at the Islay Woollen Mill, Islay House Square or Bridgend for a break.

Around Machir Bay

Park at Machir Bay, walk through the dunes to the beach, then turn left. At the end of the beach follow the track up the hill, notice Grannies Rock on the left. Time and stamina permitting continue to Kilchiaran Chapel and/or Kilchiaran Bay. Return the same way.

The American Monument on The Oa

Park at Upper Killeyan, follow the signed path out to the American Monument. On a clear day watch out for Ireland on the horizon. Return via Upper Killeyan Farm. Take great care at the cliffs, they are very steep and high.

Ardnave and Ardnave Point

Park near Ardnave Loch. Walk east through the dunes to Loch Gruinart. Look out for the seals on the sandbanks in Loch Gruinart during low tide. Follow the shore north to Ardnave Point, enjoy views over to Nave Island. Continue south west until you reach Port na Muic, then turn south east and follow the track back to Ardnave.

Killinallan

A great walk along one of Islay's more remote beaches. Drive up the east side of Loch Gruinart, park your car at the car park just before the locked gate. Cross the gate, then walk down to the beach. Follow the beach and the dunes north until you reach Killinallan Point, then turn east to walk along the beach at Tràigh Baile Aonghais. After 2 miles you'll reach Gortantaoid Point, a great place for lunch. Either retrace your steps along the beach or walk to Gortantaoid to follow the track back to the car park.

Proaig and McArthur's Head

A popular walk on the east coast of Islay. Take the A846 from Port Ellen towards Ardbeg, then continue on the single track road to Ardtalla. Just before you reach Ardtalla you arrive at Claggain Bay. Leave your car in the car park at the northern end of Claggain Bay.

Walk along the track to Ardtalla Farm, then walk across the field and cross the burn at the end. Continue north on the often rough path towards Proaig (approximately 2 miles). Depending on the water levels either ford the burn where it runs into the sea or cross it using the improvised bridge with the girder 100 yards upstream to reach the bothy.

Either turn back after a rest or time and stamina permitting continue north to McArthur's Head with its lighthouse.

Beinn Bheigier

Beinn Bheigier is Islay's highest hill at 491m/ 1611ft, located in the south east of Islay on the Ardtalla Estate.

One possible approach is from Ardtalla: Start by following the path north to Proaig, then turn west towards Beinn Bheigier. Once some height is gained turn north east to walk around the hill towards Bealach Corrach. Walk west towards the bealach, then steeply climb up to reach the summit.

A trig point marks the summit. On a clear day views include the Isle of Jura with the Paps of Jura, Kintyre, the Isle of Arran and most of Islay.

Ticks

Unfortunately there are a lot of ticks on Islay, as in many other places in Scotland now. When walking off road through vegetation you should ideally either pull your socks over your trousers or wear gaiters. After returning from your walk it is advisable to check your body for ticks and remove them carefully using the appropriate tools (also check dogs if you have taken them with you).

Maps

For outdoor activities on Islay requiring a map I recommend the Ordnance Survey Explorer maps:

- Explorer Map 353 Islay North
- Explorer Map 352 Islay South

They should be available in any good outdoor store on the mainland as well as at C&E Roy or the Tourist Information Centre in Bowmore.

The Scottish Outdoor Access Code

During all walking (and other activities) you must always observe the Scottish Outdoor Access Code, among others this includes:

1. Take responsibility for your own actions;
2. Respect people's privacy and peace of mind. When close to a house or garden, keep a sensible distance from the house, use a path or track if there is one, and take extra care at night;
3. Help land managers and others to work safely and effectively . Do not hinder land management operations and follow advice from land managers. Respect requests for reasonable limitations on when and where you can go;
4. Care for your environment. Do not disturb wildlife, leave the environment as you find it and follow a path or track if there is one;
5. Keep your dog under proper control. Do not take it through fields of calves and lambs, and dispose of dog dirt;
6. Take extra care if you are organising an event or running a business and ask the land owner's advice.

For further information and details please visit www.outdooraccess-scotland.com

Beaches

Islay has a lot of great beaches, a few I'm going to mention here:

Machir Bay

One of my favourite beaches on Islay and quite easy to get to: From the A847 between Bruichladdich and Bridgend take the B8018. Drive straight on in a westerly direction for approximately 6 miles towards Kilchoman. Park your car at the car park, then walk through the dunes to reach the beach.

Swimming is not advisable due to dangerous undercurrents, but you can walk and play on the beach for hours.

Saligo Bay

Machir Bay's northerly neighbour is Saligo Bay. Take the road north from Kilchoman and stop at Saligo, making sure you don't block any access when parking your car. Walk through the gate and then through the dunes past the remains of the old radar installations to reach the bay and the beach.

Again swimming is not advisable due to dangerous undercurrents, but you can walk and play on the beach for hours. Also one of the best places for nice sunsets.

The Big Strand

The Big Strand at Laggan Bay is probably one of the longest beaches in Scotland. It is approximately 5 miles long, only interrupted by a short rocky bit at the airport. There are three good access points I'm aware of:

1. About two miles south of Bowmore just past the bridge over the River Laggan a track turns off the A846 (signposted with access to Big Strand). Follow the track until the end, leave your car in the parking area. Walk to the beach through the dunes
2. On the northern side of the airport at Glenegadale (i.e. coming from Bowmore) you can follow a track along the airport perimeter fence. Great for watching the planes coming in over Laggan Bay
3. Kintra Farm. Take the road out from Port Ellen to Kintra, park at the campground at Kintra Farm. Quite easy access walking through the dunes

Kilnaughton Bay

A very popular beach just west of Port Ellen. Drive from Port Ellen towards The Oa, turning left to The Oa and then turning left again at the cemetery. Follow the track down to the bay, limited parking is available.

Sandy beach with great views over to Port Ellen and Carraig Fhada lighthouse.

The Singing Sands

From Kilnaughton Bay it is not far to the famous Singing Sands: Either walk from Kilnaughton Bay or park in the small car park just before Carraig Fhada farm. Take the signposted path on the right side of the track to reach the beach after a short walk. If you're lucky the sand will “sing” for you, apparently just walking on it in the right conditions will create the sound. Even if it doesn't sing for you the beach is beautiful with very nice views to Port Ellen and the mainland.

Claggain Bay

It's a quite long drive out, but I think it's worth it: Take the A846 from Port Ellen towards Ardbeg, then continue on the single track road to Ardtalla. Just before you reach Ardtalla you arrive at Claggain Bay. The beach is not a sandy beach, but consists of pebbles. It's a beautiful bay where you can spend several hours. Quite a lot of wildlife to observe usually.

On both sides of Loch Gruinart you'll find nice beaches:

Ardnave

Park your car at Ardnave Loch, then walk east through the dunes to Loch Gruinart. The beach and the dunes stretch along the loch, the best areas probably walking north a little bit. Also a good spot to watch the seals on the sandbanks in Loch Gruinart during low tide.

Killinallan Beach and Dunes

Drive up the east side of Loch Gruinart, park your car at the car park just before the locked gate (Killinallan Gate). Cross the gate, then walk down to the beach. Follow the beach and the dunes north until you reach Killinallan Point. Discover the dunes, or if you feel like it walk further along the beach at Tràigh Baile Aonghais.

From near the gate is also a good spot to watch the seals on the sandbanks in Loch Gruinart during low tide.

Excursions from Islay

There are two islands which can be reached for a day trip from Islay, the closest neighbour is the Isle of Jura, the other the Isle of Colonsay:

Isle of Jura

Just across the Sound of Islay is the Isle of Jura, the short ferry crossing only takes 5-10 minutes and runs on average every 30min (but there are a few longer gaps). The ferry runs from the morning until the late afternoon, some evening crossings are also possible. Check the timetable locally and plan accordingly, note that some of the late ferries need to be booked well in advance (Ferry Operated by ASP Ship Management Ltd. Tel +44(0)1496-840681).

Jura has only one (single track) road, running from the ferry slip to the “capital” Craighouse and then up along the west of the island. A few suggestions of places and attractions to visit on Jura:

Craighouse

Craighouse is the main centre of population on Jura, stretching out along the Bay of Small Isles. It is a nice place to spend a little bit of time:

You can visit the Isle of Jura distillery (Tel. +44(0)1496-820385, www.isleofjura.com) which has a distillery shops and offers guided tours. The Jura Hotel (Tel. +44(0)1496-820243, www.jurahotel.co.uk) has a very nice beer garden in front of the hotel, very nice for lunch. There is a small but very interesting museum about life on Jura behind the church.

Jura House Gardens

Approx 4.5 miles from the ferry slip are Jura House Gardens (see also www.jurahouseandgardens.co.uk), which offers a walled garden as well as two walks through the grounds of Jura House. During the summer a tea tent is available for refreshments. A small entry fee applies.

Walking and wildlife

Jura has a lot of wildlife, in particular several thousand deer. It will be almost impossible to visit Jura without spotting any deer. But you also have a good chance to see otters, Golden Eagles and various other birds.

Jura is a paradise for walkers with a lot of very remote and beautiful landscape. The Ordnance Survey map is the Explorer Map 355 Jura & Scarba.

Climbing the famous Paps of Jura should only be undertaken by experienced walkers or at least with an experienced guide. Navigation can be tricky in particular in bad weather (and the weather can change very quickly on the Paps). There are a number of routes to the summits, I recommend looking them up in walking guides as describing them here would take this guide too far.

Evan's walk starts just under a mile north of the three arched bridge. This path will take you all the way across the island through Glen Batrick to Loch Tarbert. Rough ground in places, a good path in others. 6 miles one way, 12 miles return.

For all walks make sure that you know your maps and compass, also build in enough time to catch the ferry back to Islay.

Isle of Colonsay

Every Wednesday it is possible to visit Colonsay for a few hours on a day trip from Islay. The morning ferry from Port Askaig to Oban via Colonsay arrives on Colonsay approx 11:30hrs, then returns again on the same route leaving Colonsay approx 18:00hrs, giving you approx 6 hours on Colonsay. Just make sure you don't miss the return ferry, otherwise you'll be stuck unless you can arrange a transfer back to Islay with a small boat.

There are three main attractions on Colonsay:

Kiloran Bay on Colonsay

Kiloran Bay in the north west of Colonsay is probably one of the most beautiful and photogenic bays in Scotland, a wide bay with a golden sandy beach flanked by Colonsay highest hill Carnan Eoin. On a clear day the Isle of Mull can be seen in the north, to the west is only the Atlantic, next stop America. Walking from Scalasaig should take approx 45min to an hour.

While at Kiloran Bay you can sunbathe, swim (if it's warm enough), surf (after a strong westerly wind the rollers should be big enough) or fly kites (as there's usually at least a breeze). For the more energetic I recommend the short walk up Carnan Eoin for excellent views over Kiloran Bay, Colonsay and over to the Isle of Jura.

Colonsay House Gardens

While Colonsay House (home of Lord Strathcona) itself isn't open to the public its wonderful gardens can be visited (opening hours should coincide with the ferry arrival and departure).

Various paths lead through the woodlands and gardens, providing nice views especially in spring and early summer. The Pond is a nice place to relax, home made cakes and tea are available at Colonsay House for refreshments.

You might also want to look out for the Tobar Oran cross and well, located near the house towards the north east. The early Christian statue is from the 7th or 8th century, standing next to the well dedicated to St Oran.

Walking over The Strand to Oronsay, visiting the priory

A great experience is the 1.5 miles walk to Oronsay over The Strand, only possible at low tide. Before setting out for Oronsay make sure that the tide is correct, it is only possible to walk to and from Oronsay leaving approx 2hrs before low tide and having returned 2hrs after low tide. While it is possible to drive over The Strand I wouldn't recommend it (If your car gets stuck you are in big trouble...)

Apart from the walk over The Strand the main attraction on Oronsay is the Priory. Most of what can be seen today are remains of the 15th and 16th century Augustinian Priory although legend has it that St Columba founded a monastery here in the 6th century on his way to Iona. The Priory was home to a school of stonemasons, don't miss the Great Cross as well as the tombstones now on display in the Prior's House.

What to do on a rainy day

Islay being in Scotland and on the Atlantic coast means you will quite likely experience the odd rainy day. Here are some options/ suggestions for a rainy day:

Stay at “home”

You're on holiday, you don't have to do something. So why not just stay at “home” and relax? If your accommodation has a fireplace light the fire and relax in front of the fire. Read a good book, enjoy a nice wee dram of Islay single malt whisky and relax. Have a chat with other guests.

Fireplaces are usually operated with coal or peat. If not provided you can buy a 10kg bag for approx £3 from most shops or petrol stations, which should last for 2-4 evenings. It's not recommended to use wood collected on the beaches, the high salt content can cause it to “spit”.

Visit a distillery

With all of the distilleries offering distillery tours this is a good option to keep you busy for a few hours. Most of the time during the tours will be spent indoors, just bring an umbrella and/or a raincoat for the short distances between the buildings.

Go for a swim

This might sound a bit paradox, going for a swim if you don't really want to go outside to avoid getting wet. But if you don't want to go swimming outdoors because it is grey and miserable why not go for a swim indoors in the 25m indoor pool of the Mactaggart Leisure Centre (Tel. +44(0)1496-810767) next to the distillery in Bowmore? Other facilities include a sauna and a fitness studio.

Go shopping

Get your souvenir shopping out of the way and visit some of the places where you can buy Islay souvenirs. Persabus Pottery, the Islay Woollen Mill and Elizabeth Sykes Batiks are good options to look around on a rainy day. Or buy an Islay book at C&E Roy which you can then read in front of the fire. See the “Souvenir Shopping” section for further details.

Visit the Islay Museum

The Museum of Islay Life (Tel. +44(0)1496-850358) in Port Charlotte gives an excellent overview about Islay's history and life on Islay through the centuries. The museum is based in a former church in the northern part of Port Charlotte, just opposite the Croft Kitchen restaurant.

Visit the Islay Wildlife Information Centre

The Islay Natural History Trust runs the Wildlife Information Centre (Tel +44(0)1496-850288, same building as the youth hostel) in Port Charlotte. The centre provides displays about Islay's wildlife and natural history, there are regular lectures and presentations as well.

Eating Out

After all that activity you will be hungry. There are a variety of places where you can eat on Islay. I've tried to group a few suggestions I've eaten at by region:

The West

On the Rhinns your main options are in Bruichladdich, Port Charlotte and Portnahaven.

- Debbie's mini mart in Bruichladdich (+44-(0)1496-850319, www.welcometogreatcoffee.co.uk, close to the distillery) in addition to the shop offers a small cafe with nice cakes. I'm also told she makes the best coffee on Islay (I don't drink coffee, so I can't judge its quality).
- An taigh-osda in Bruichladdich (Tel +44-(0)1496-850587) offers lunches and evening meals for non-residents as well. As the restaurant is very small booking is highly recommended.
- The Port Charlotte Hotel (Tel. +44-(0)1496-850360) offers two options: The restaurant offers excellent (but fairly expensive) meals in a very nice atmosphere. Bar meals are available in either the bar or the conservatory. In both cases booking is advisable, especially on weekends.
- The Croft Kitchen (Tel +44-(0)1496-850230) in Port Charlotte provides simple inexpensive meals
- An Tigh Seinnse (Tel. +44-(0)1496-860224) on Queen Street in Portnahaven is a pub also offering good meals, at times next to an open fire.
- The Port Mòr Centre (www.islandofislay.co.uk, Tel. +44-(0)1496-850442) has a café offering breakfast, lunch and dinner

The Centre

In the centre of Islay your main options are in Bridgend and Bowmore:

- The Bridgend Hotel (Tel. +44-(0)1496-810212) offers lunches and dinners in the restaurant as well as bar meals in Katie's Bar
- The Harbour Inn (Tel. +44-(0)1496-810330) on The Square in Bowmore is an award winning restaurant, serving mainly local produce. Expensive.
- The Lochside Hotel (Tel. +44-(0)1496-810244) on Shore Street in Bowmore has restaurant with great views over Loch Indaal from the conservatory. I'm told the fish & chips with fresh haddock is excellent. Also Duffies Bar with a huge selection of whiskies.

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- The Cottage Restaurant (Tel. +44(0)1496-810704) on Main Street in Bowmore offers simple snacks and lunches, very good value for money.

The South

In the south your main options are in Port Ellen and Ardbeg:

- The Old Kiln Cafe at Ardbeg Distillery (Tel. +44(0)1496-302244) is known for excellent lunches and generous portions. My first choice when I'm in that part of Islay.
- For a snack you can try The Corner Kitchen at the Cybercafe (Tel. +44(0)1496-300477) in Port Ellen. From Frederick Crescent turn into Mansefield Road, then turn right into Mansefield Place, the Cybercafe with the Corner Kitchen is on the left.

The North

The north seems to have surprisingly few options I can think of. Only two places I can suggest from personal experience:

- The Ballygrant Inn (Tel. +44(0)1496-840277) just north of Ballygrant offers food all day, both in the restaurant as well as bar meals. It is also known for its curry nights (which I can't comment on further as I don't eat much Indian food)
- Persabus Pottery on the road to Bunnahabhain used to offer home made cakes and baking as well as tea and coffee in their pottery showroom. Unfortunately this seems to have closed now, hopefully it will reopen at some point.

Other Options

For completeness a few more options I haven't visited myself yet and therefore can't really comment on:

- Islay now has two Indian restaurants, one in Bowmore (The Taj Mahal, Shore Street, Tel +44-(0)1496-810033) and one in Port Ellen (The Maharani, Frederick Crescent, Tel +44-(0)1496-300300)
- The White Hart Hotel (Tel. +44(0)1496-300120) in Port Ellen has a restaurant and a function room
- The Port Askaig Hotel is serving evening meals and bar meals
- The Aerodrome Cafe at Islay Airport serves food

In most of the restaurants it is recommended to book a table in advance, otherwise you might not be able to get a table on the evening. This applies in particular over the weekend.

Souvenir Shopping

Before you leave Islay you might want to buy some souvenirs to take home with you. A few suggestions of what you might want to take:

Whisky

An obvious choice considering the number of distilleries on Islay. All the distilleries have a shop selling whiskies and/or distillery related merchandise. If you are flying remember the restriction on liquids in your hand luggage though, make sure you wrap any bottles well and put them in your suitcase.

Islay Ales

Islay Ales Brewery (Tel +44(0)1496-810014) can be found at Islay House Square. After trying some of the ales you can take some home with you. Also on sale is various merchandise.

Elizabeth Sykes Batiks

Also on Islay House Square is Elizabeth Sykes Batiks (Tel. +44(0)1496-810147). You can buy prints and greeting cards of her mainly Islay inspired batiks, showing a variety of motifs including Islay distilleries and wildlife.

Photography (Islay Studios)

For some great pictures of Islay you should visit Islay Studios (+44(0)1496-850098) on Islay House Square. You can buy framed or unframed prints of Mark Unsworth's excellent pictures from the studio on the front left of Islay House Square.

Persabus Pottery

Persabus Pottery (Tel. +44(0)1496-840753) on the road to Bunnahabhain used to offer a variety of products, ranging from cups to lamps to night lights to whisky jugs. Most designs by Arra and Iomhar Fletcher were Islay or Celtic inspired. Unfortunately it closed in summer 2008, although you might still be able to find a few last bits and pieces in the old pottery shop or in some other places.

Islay Woollen Mill

For some unique tartans you should visit the Islay Woollen Mill (Tel. +44-(0)1496-810563) near Bridgend (signposted from the A846 Bridgend to Port Askaig). Run by Gordon and Sheila Covell it still uses two looms from Victorian times. Tartans designed and/or produced by the mill has been used in a number of Hollywood films including Braveheart, Rob Roy and Forrest Gump.

Books and Jewellery

Roy's Celtic House in Bowmore (right at the corner of Main Street and Shore Street, www.theceltichouse.co.uk, Tel +44-(0)1496-810304) is a great source for books about Islay and Jura, Islay related jewellery and a number of other goods.

Celtic Craft

The Islay Celtic Craft Shop (at the top of Main Street next to the post office, Tel +44-(0)1496-810262) sells a variety of items including jewellery, paintings and ceramics.

Food stuff

For a taste of Islay to take home with you a few suggestions:

- Islay Tablet and Islay Single Malt Whisky Tablet made in Port Charlotte for those with a sweet tooth. I've seen it in a number of shops including Debbie's mini mart in Bruichladdich
- Islay honey is available from R. Ferguson at 7 Crown Street in Portnahaven in two versions: Wildflower honey and Heather honey
- Smoked meat and other delicatessen from Islay Fine Foods are available from the delicatessen shop at the Kilchoman Distillery visitor centre
- If your journey isn't too far (and if import regulations allow should you travel abroad), Campbell Butchers at 56 Frederick Crescent in Port Ellen (Tel+44-(0)1496-300480) will vacuum pack Islay meat for you.

IT, Internet and Islay Websites

IT and Internet services

This guide is mainly designed for offline use, but I've mentioned websites in various places. With smartphones, laptops and wifi spreading more and more you might want to access the internet even while you're on Islay.

Several places now offer (free) wifi access, including accommodation as well as hotels and restaurants. Just ask while making your booking/reservation. An internet cafe is available with the Islay CyberCafe (www.islaycybercafe.co.uk, Tel. +44-(0)1496-302693) in 30 Mansefield Place, Port Ellen.

If you have any IT needs while on Islay I recommend contacting James McGregor at IslayIT in Port Charlotte (www.islayit.com, Tel. +44-(0)1496-850032 or +44-(0)7801-352402).

Islay Websites

My own Islay related sites

I run a number of Islay related websites, in chronological order from when I set them up they are:

- My Isle of Islay pages at www.armin-grewe.com/islay/
- My Islay blog at www.islayblog.com
- My Islay pictures photoblog at www.islay.org.uk

As you've found this guide there is a quite high likelihood that you've visited at least one of them at some point.

Other Islay websites

A selection of other informative and helpful Islay websites:

- The Islay and Jura Tourism Marketing Group with a lot of tourism information can be found at www.islayjura.com
- Ron from The Netherlands runs the IslayInfo website with attached weblog and forum at www.islayinfo.com
- Gordon runs a great website about Islay whisky at www.spiritofislay.net

Your notes:

A space for your notes for or during your visit to Islay:

Thank you!

A number of people have sent me input or feedback since I started publishing this guide, thank you all for your help! Without your encouragement and suggestions I wouldn't have been able to get the guide to what it is now.

And finally...

All that remains for me to say is: Enjoy your stay on Islay!

If you find this guide helpful or if you have suggestions for improvement please let me know after your return from Islay. Feel free to share the guide with other visitors to Islay and pass it on.