

Introduction

Contact

Berthing and pontoons: Ian Montgomery 07464 151200

Although Islay has been inhabited from way back into the stone ages, then occupied by the Vikings, fought over by the Scottish clans until the early 18th Century, Port Ellen was not established as a community until one of the Campbells started to develop the island. Unfortunately the efforts to improve the island were wrecked by the same potato famine that blighted Ireland and further destroyed by the Scottish Clearances instituted by absentee landlords who had taken over the island from the bankrupted Campbells.

What has saved the island is the establishment of their distilling industry; the peaty water adds a distinctive flavour and aroma to the whisky produced on the island and the peat bogs have provided the fuel to distil it. No visit to Port Ellen is complete without a visit to one of the distilleries here. For the cruising sailor it is a comfortable day's sail from Donegal or Antrim and leads on up the Sound of Jura through the breathtaking scenery of the West of Scotland.

Admittedly if you have come round or returning round the Mull you will probably go via Ghia thus avoiding crossing the North Channel but for the South of England sailor who has opted for the tidal advantages of the west side of the Irish Sea (see [HERE](#) for our article else where on this site) this is your gateway to the North.

The harbour lies within a shallow bay at the southern end of Islay and until the early "naughties" was merely a sheltered anchorage which served the fishing fleet and the CalMac ferry connection with the mainland but the locals have slowly improved the conditions, first adding a tidal finger with pontoon berths and subsequently a second one and both are now maintained at 3m. There is now (2017) a third pontoon!!

It is a very informal affair, looked after by the Port Ellen Harbour Association, there is no Harbour Master, you look after yourself but will probably find a member of the Association around at some time during the day who will be very willing and very helpful. **The achievements of this local, community based, harbour association must not be understated; in less than ten years they have turned this wee harbour from an overnight bolt hole into a "must visit" destination in the Isles** and they have further plans for a breakwater which will make the overwintering of yachts a possibility (2019 They haven't made any more progress on the breakwater so it remains a "plan". It's astonishing when compared to other places in the West Highlands.

Their website is at <http://www.portellenmarina.co.uk>

Harbours nearby[Craobh Haven](#); [Ballycastle](#); [Glenarm](#)

If coming from or going to Ballycastle there is comprehensive information of the tides in and around Rathlin Island and the NE corner of Northern Ireland on the [Rathlin Island "More info"](#) page on this site

Approach

Your first look at the chart when you are planning a visit here will be....

.... fairly daunting as the East side of the approach to the bay is guarded by numerous rocks and skerries and the west side by overfalls stretching right out as far as the Middle Bank. In fact it is not that bad, as a route avoiding most of the unpleasantness can be plotted with very little diversion. The entrance to the bay itself is down at the SW corner near the Carraig Fhada Lighthouse on a NNW heading passing the SHM (Green Buoy) then turning North to clear the ECM off the lighthouse and, finally, when you have the end of the pier on about 072 you head for that. The skerries and shallow water to the SE of the final approach leg are marked by some small green buoys, don't stray outside that line!

The ECM to the East of Carraig Fhada Lighthouse and on the Otter Gander shallows were laid 2011/2012 and will not show on out of date charts and especially on out of date chart plotters. (The chart supplied on this site **is** up to date as you would expect!)

If you are coming down the Sound of Jura you need to plot a course a good 2.5 miles to the East of Ardmore point and hold that distance off all the way down to abeam Texa, aiming for a point about halfway between Texa and the Otter Rock before turning in towards the channel on a westerly heading until the light house is in line with the radio masts on the hills behind it (see the photo in our gallery). You can, if you wish, pass between Texa and the main island but it'll only save you just over half mile so is hardly worth the anxiety!!

The coast between Ardmore point and Texa has been extensively explored by the Antares chart people and they have chart coverage of the small bays and lochs serving the distilleries along that coast (Antares charts meld in with the UKHO charts on Sea Clear) but this is probably more for the dedicated drinker than the dedicated sailor although one can have one's feet in both camps!

Coming from the West or SW you will have to work your way clear of the overfalls around the Middle Bank and the Mull of Oa and then head for the channel around the ECM on the Otter Gander and thence to the Port Ellen SHM. You can find a tidal atlas for the waters between here and Northern Island/Scotland at

<http://www.visitmyharbour.com/articles/3166/hourly-tidal-streams-around-the-n-of-ireland-and-sw-of-scotland>

The amount of water around the two pontoon fingers is better than that indicated on the Admiralty chart; they dredged a considerable amount out a couple of years ago (2011??) and now, as long as you leave the three small green SH buoys to starboard and don't go beyond the red buoys which guard the end of the channel, there's plenty of depth and even enough room to raft on other boats on the hammer heads.

Berthing

Visitors will normally find a berth somewhere on the first....

.... or second pontoon on a first come, first served basis; there is not a Harbour Master to allocate berths or to book in advance. The last (north easterly) pontoon will generally be completely occupied by local angling boats. In 2022 they are charging £25 per night under 10 metres and £27 between 10 m and 12 metres and £30 over 12 metres. The Hammerhead for really long boats is £40; if no one appears to collect your money (cash only) you can leave your money with the Harbour Office which is in the terrace of houses which overlooks the most easterly of the pontoons.

Facilities

You would be wrong in expecting minimal services here in the back of beyond; there is shore power and water (included in the mooring fee) on all the pontoon berths. Fuel in cans is available at the petrol station just beyond the White Hart Hotel on the Bowmore road (I've a feeling he was closed on Sundays so you'd need to check if arriving on a Saturday) and just behind that was a chandlery operating out of a couple of porta-cabins (though this may have expanded by now). He was open on a Sunday when I went through. Both Calor and Camping gas refills are available locally in the hardware store at the end of the sea front.

There is also a boatyard with facilities to lift yachts out for the winter.

Showers and toilets are available in the B & B abutting the harbour (you can find directions on their notice board) and we are told that they are available 24/7. They do have plans for an amenities block but that will involve some horse trading and planning permission as the War Memorial occupies the foreshore in the vicinity of the pontoons.

Update 2017. They are building the amenities block which will have toilets, showers and a laundrette. They hope to have it up and running by July this year (2017)

What To Do

Port Ellen has several hotels which have restaurants, there is an Indian restaurant/take away and a "Cyber Café" (though the hotels also have Wifi.)

If music and whisky is to your liking you should plan your visit here in the last week of May when they hold a Festival of Music and Whisky

History