

FOCUS ON... Cowal & Argyll

The Best Of The West...

A wonderful area to explore on a
leisurely cultural or active break

by GARRY FRASER

Picture: SPENCER BOWMAN/GETTY IMAGES

Ben Arthur, known as The Cobbler

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Doon The Watter To Dunoon

A short ferry ride leads to the gateway to Cowal

THERE are other ways to get there – like a 60-plus mile road trip – but for smart and immediate access to the Cowal peninsula, the 25-minute Gourock-Dunoon ferry is the best.

Once you land at Dunoon, your first sight is a bonnie Highland lass. However, she is made of stone – she's Highland Mary, or Bonnie Mary O' Argyll. From her vantage point on Castle Hill she gazes fondly towards Ayrshire, home of the love of her life, Rabbie Burns.

From the 1960s to the early 1990s, Dunoon was thriving. The US Navy nuclear submarine fleet was anchored in nearby Holy Loch during the Cold War with Russia, and consequently business flourished and the housing market was buoyant. The withdrawal of US forces in 1992 was to hit the town hard.

There are signs of regeneration, though, with a new marina, refurbishment of the old Victorian pier and properties being restored.

Many of these boast enviable views down the Firth of Clyde and are ideal for a holiday home or even a place to retire to.

Tourism specialist Kirsty Weir, born and bred in Dunoon, made for a perfect guide. She prepared an extensive itinerary, but it was soon apparent that what I was about to see was the tip of an iceberg of attractions that Cowal can offer. I would see quite a lot of the east side, but the west will be left for another day.

I had heard that the church at Kilmun, across the Holy Loch from Dunoon, had a water-powered organ and, as an organist, this intrigued me very much. The

mysteries of plumbing apart, the organ was a delight to play, a recently refurbished Norman and Beard of 1909 vintage.

There was a gathering in the church and when Kirsty said they had come to hear me play, I wasn't sure if she was joking or not!

Adjacent to the church is the Argyll Mausoleum, burial chamber of the Campbell chiefs since the 15th century with the last to be buried there Nial Diarmid, the 10th Duke.

In fact for such a small place, Kilmun has an amazingly rich history – it is believed St Munn landed there in the sixth century after leaving Ireland. For more details explore www.historickilmun.org

After lunch in Benmore Botanic Gardens café – and a guided tour of the gardens by Peter Baxter, curator – there was just enough time for a walk up Puck's Glen (see page 29) before Kirsty dropped me off in Dunoon. I could still squeeze in a visit to the Castle Museum, say hello to Highland Mary and have a wander through downtown Dunoon.

It's worth taking a stroll along the promenade – which is quite long – to give you an idea of the lie of the land.

One day isn't enough. As a centre for a few days' holiday, Dunoon has plenty good accommodation and places to eat out which will give you the chance to relax before exploring Cowal's many delights.



Step into
a timewarp

Forging A Link To The Past

An 18th-century building in Strachur offers visitors an interesting reminder of times past. The Smiddy dates from 1791 and was very likely built for General John Campbell, the first owner of nearby Strachur House. For all its operational life it was in the hands of the Montgomery family, spanning four generations of village blacksmiths.

The contents have remained untouched since it closed in the mid-1950s, thus providing a unique record of the technology used. For more information, phone 01369 860508.



“Many of the properties being restored boast enviable views down the Firth of Clyde”

Rooms With A View

Ardkinglas House has architectural and arboreal claims to fame

ARDKINGLAS HOUSE is a jewel on the shores of Loch Fyne. It hits you unawares.

The access to this marvellous building near Cairndow is through woods which eventually open up to the courtyard and gardens. This is imposing enough, but a closer inspection reveals lochside splendour and a view south down Loch Fyne to die for.

Little wonder Sir Andrew Noble chose this site at the turn of the 20th century – and little wonder he chose Sir Robert Lorimer to build his new home. Lorimer designed everything down to the door handles and employed only

the best craftsmen. The end result is generally considered to be his finest work.

Ardkinglas is unique in more than one way. It was built on schedule and on budget, completed in 1907, and was the first building in Argyll to have electricity powered by its own hydro scheme. Each room has its own plaster design and other state-of-the-art technology included a phone system, central heating, a lift and fire-fighting equipment.

The library is on two levels incorporating a snooker table, and the three-storey south wing consists of three oval-shaped rooms with doors fashioned to fit the unusual shape. Sir Andrew's daughter, Lily, was determined that there was not to be "an inch of painted paper from one end of the house to the other." Consequently, the walls are either panelled or plastered.

What caught my attention most were the kitchen quarters, beautifully tiled, with a real *Upstairs Downstairs* feel. The house is currently owned by Sir Andrew's great-great-nephew David Sumsion, who is the fifth generation to own the house.

Ardkinglas Estate covers around 4850 hectares (12,000 acres), including access to the Munro Beinn Bhuidhe, with forestry playing an important role. Commercial woodlands to the south of the house are managed for timber production, but the woodland gardens contain some of the country's oldest trees, with some planted in the 1800s. Oldest – and at one point the tallest! The estate's *Abies Grandis* was the tallest tree in Britain until a Douglas Fir near Inverness surpassed it. The Ardkinglas tree was planted as a sapling in 1875 and measured 64.28m (210ft 11in) when it was last climbed. But its rival now holds the crown, standing at a mammoth 66.4m (217ft 10in).

Jean Maskell is Ardkinglas estate manager, and has been there for 17 years.

"It is the never-ending variety of work that attracted me here," she says. "Despite the list on my desk of things I must do, I never know what the day will bring. It's busy



A former record holder

*"The estate's *Abies Grandis* was the tallest tree in Britain until a Douglas Fir surpassed it"*



Built with all mod cons, the house is largely unaltered

and can be fraught with long hours – but I get great satisfaction at the end of the day!"

Jean has seen herself involved in many tasks not normally associated with estate management, including donning a beekeeper's suit to help one of the tenants, herding stray sheep and cattle, rescuing film crews who have run out of petrol and acting as a witness for one of the many weddings that take place in the house.

"We employ a full-time gardener and have regular contractors to do the stalking, farming and forestry. We

also encourage volunteers to come and work on the estate," she explained.

● Ardkinglas House is a much-loved family home and although not open to the public on a regular basis, a private tour can be booked at any time of the year. A public tour is available every Friday from April to October. A unique self-catering apartment, the original Butler's Quarters, can be rented all year round. For more information go to www.ardkinglas.com >>

A Fairy Den

Puck's Glen might be only 3.5km (2.2 miles) long, but as short walks go it takes some beating. You follow a tumbling burn, criss-crossed by bridges enclosed by rocky, heavily-mossed walls and overshadowed by a canopy of trees and bushes.

A pair of stout walking shoes is advisable too, as the path can get slippery underfoot. Puck's Glen is connected to the forest trails in the surrounding area and an information board gives details of the other way-marked paths. This fairy-glade is short yet spectacular and ideal for a family ramble or a nice picnic if the weather's agreeable.



The enchanting Puck's Glen

Four-Wheel Drive

Quad-biking is off-road fun for all the family

QUADMANIA is a family activity centre based outside of Dunoon that specialises in quad-biking, archery and clay pigeon shooting.

However when I visited David Marshall's centre at Blairmore, I found the simple art of quad-biking to be beyond me.

David had the patience of a saint as I fumbled through the basic art of steering, eventually admitting defeat. It didn't make me feel any better when David said a 93-year-old had managed, no problem! However, in my defence, if I had had a longer trial period, things might have improved.

Thanks to David, my experience of quad-biking didn't end there as he was quite prepared to give me a quick tour of part of his 800-hectare (2000-acre) site on the back of his bike. I was grateful for the chance to experience what is quite an exciting sport that caters for every terrain.

Up streams, down forest paths, through high grass and heather and across ditches, it's very much an all-year-round sport with only deep snow and thick ice being any deterrent.

Whether as an individual or as part of a team, it's an exhilarating way to spend a couple of hours, among beautiful scenery in an idyllic part of Scotland.

David and his wife Fiona set up Quadmania 10 years

David Marshall aims to offer a positive experience



ago and it is part of their working farm alongside hill sheep, Highland cattle and free-range chickens. The surrounding countryside is part of the Loch Lomond National Park, giving a wonderful natural backdrop for those learning new skills.

Their achievement of a Visit Scotland 5-star rating in 2010 – the only quad-biking centre in Scotland to gain this status – is testament to their commitment to bringing the best activities to the area.

"I am passionate about Cowal as I think it is a wonderful place to live or visit," David says. "I'm pleased that we are contributing to the tourism industry by providing a positive experience for visitors.

"We may have cornered the market in this part of Scotland, but we can't afford to rest on our laurels. Attention to detail and marketing is very important if we are to keep the product attractive."

With four self-catering cottages also on the farm, it really is the perfect base for an activity holiday for families, group outings or for individuals simply wanting some variety in life.

There is one thing you can be certain of – anyone who climbs onto one of David's quad-bikes is sure to have more success than I did!



Scotland's Alps

The Arrochar Alps are some of the most easily identified mountains in Scotland. Five Munros are included in the range – Beinn Ime, Beinn Bhuidhe, Ben Vorlich, Ben Vane and Beinn Narnain – but probably the most famous only reaches Corbett status, Ben Arthur or the Cobbler, as it is more generally known.

There are walks and climbs for people of all abilities, from gentle rambles to tough rock-climbing. It's a mountaineer's paradise whether you're a Munroist, a Corbett-ticker or someone who simply likes a good day in the hills.

"Up streams, then through forest, high grass and heather..."



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PLACES TO STAY...

Esplanade Hotel, Dunoon. 01369 704070. Fantastic views down the Clyde. Popular with bus parties.

The Royal an Lochan, Tighnabruaich. 01700 811239. Restaurant, art gallery and bar facilities.



Portavadie Spa and Leisure. 01700 811075. Beautiful location on the south west tip of Cowal.

Best Western Argyll Hotel, Dunoon. 01369 702059. Imposing building close to ferry terminal offers both Scottish and Indian cuisine.



Coylet Inn, Loch Eck. 01369 840426. Local ale and local produce on the banks of one of Scotland's most beautiful lochs.

Creggans Inn, Strachur. 01369 860279. Fine dining and bar meals on Loch Fyne-side.

...PLACES TO EAT...

Benmore Botanic Gardens Café. 01369 706261. Snacks, coffees and home baking.

La Cantina Italian Restaurant, Dunoon. 01369 703595.

The Inn at Colintrave, 01700 841207. Award-winning gastro-pub close to the Bute ferry.

The Oystercatcher, Otter Ferry, Tighnabruaich. 01700 821229. A pub-restaurant right on the beach serving the best of local produce.

The Osborne, Innellan. 01369 830820. Excellent food and drink within easy reach of Dunoon.



Kilmun Church



...THINGS TO DO

Fyne Ales Brewery, Cairndow. 01499 600120. Enjoy a pie and a pint of delicious real ale.

Kilmun Church and Argyll Mausoleum. Visit the resting place of the Campbells.

Lazer HQ, Hunters Bay. 07917 845580. Combat games for individuals, families or teams.

Castle House Museum, Dunoon 01369 701422. Step back in time with Dunoon memorabilia.

Caol Ruadh Sculpture Park, Colintrave. Contemporary sculpture created in Scotland. 07771 996656. 

Argyll Mausoleum



Castle House Museum

