

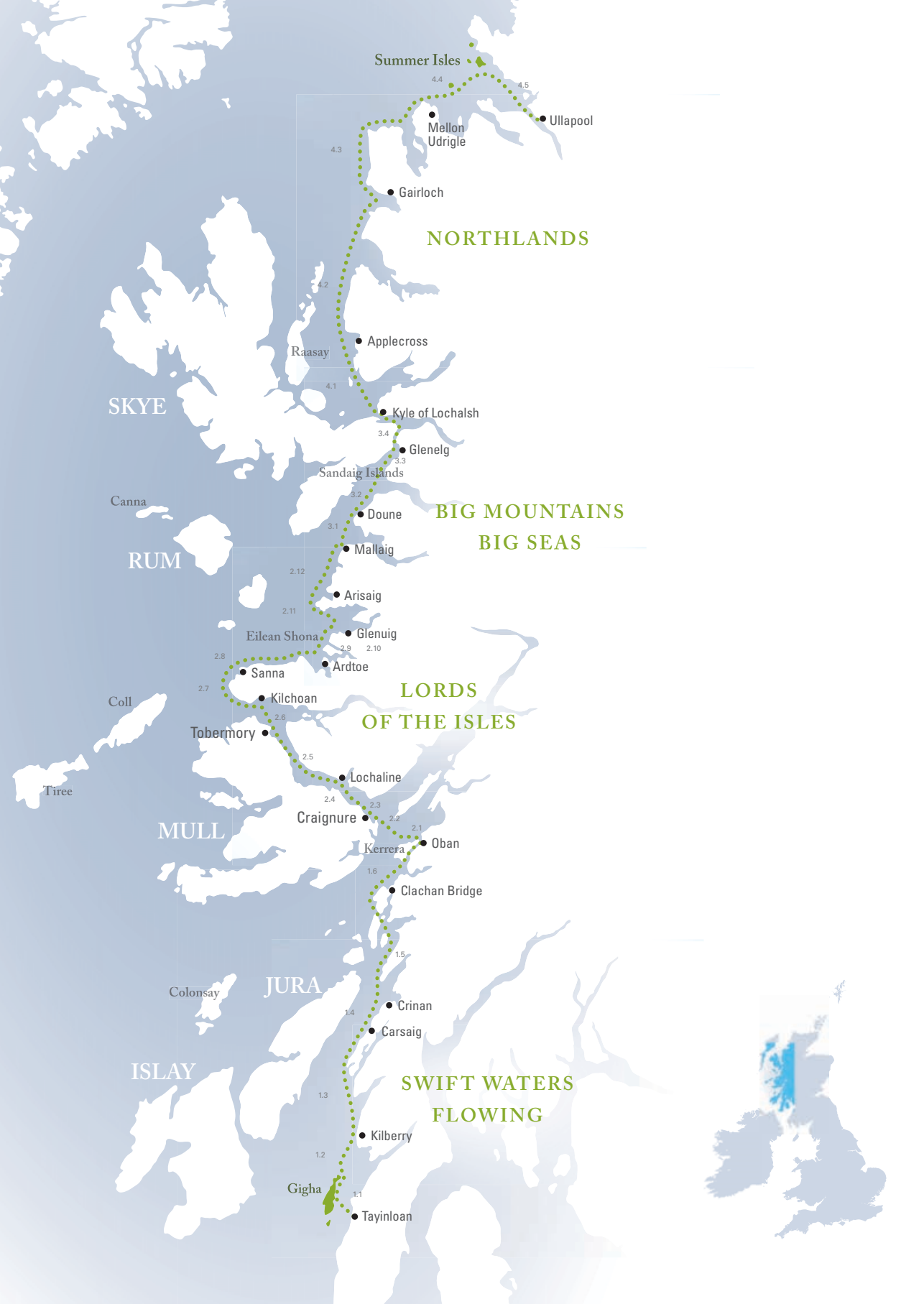


SIMON WILLIS

SCOTTISH SEA KAYAK TRAIL



A voyage of 500km along Scotland's spectacular west coast described in detail. How to tackle the entire journey or break it into holiday-length sections.



Summer Isles

4.4 4.5

Mellon Udrigle

Ullapool

Gairloch

NORTHLANDS

Applecross

Raasay

Kyle of Lochalsh

Glenelg

Sandaig Islands

Doune

BIG MOUNTAINS

BIG SEAS

Mallaig

Arisaig

Eilean Shona

Glenuig

Ardtoe

LORDS

OF THE ISLES

Sanna

Kilchoan

Tobermory

Lochaline

Craignure

Kerrera

Oban

Clachan Bridge

MULL

JURA

Colonsay

Crinan

Carsaig

SWIFT WATERS

FLOWING

Kilberry

Gigha

Tayinloan

SKYE

Canna

RUM

Coll

Tiree

ISLAY



SIMON WILLIS

SCOTTISH
SEA KAYAK
TRAIL 

First published 2009

Published in Great Britain 2009 by Pesda Press

Unit 22, Galeri

Doc Victoria

Caernarfon

Gwynedd

LL55 1SQ

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ISBN: 978-1-906095-17-8

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Printed and bound in Poland. www.polskabook.pl

To Liz,
for opening up a new world.

Warning

Sea kayaking is inherently a potentially dangerous sport. With this considered, users of this guide should take the appropriate precautions before putting to sea.

The information supplied in this book has been thoroughly researched; however the author can take no responsibility if tidal times differ or if the information supplied is not sufficient to negotiate the conditions experienced on the day. Conditions can change quickly and dramatically on the sea and there is no substitute for utilising personal experience and good judgement when kayaking or (arguably even more importantly) whilst planning a sea trip.

The guide is no substitute for personal ability, personal risk assessment and good judgement. Remember that the outdoors cannot be made risk free and that you should plan and act with care at all times for your own safety and that of others. The decision on whether to go out sea kayaking or not, and any consequences arising from that decision, remain yours and yours alone.

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📷 Liz and Simon in the shallows of Loch Moidart near their home (page 103). Photo | Daniel Mitchell.



Foreword

Scotland's west coast, together with the Hebrides and the Northern Isles, constitutes one of the best recreational sea-kayaking environments in the world. This explains why people have been paddling there for almost 140 years and the first circumnavigation of the mainland, from the Solway to the Tyne, took place over a century ago. Those early canoeists ventured into the exciting and challenging waters in craft not all that different from the sea kayaks of today, but without the benefits of purpose-designed clothing, buoyancy aids, dry suits and certainly without guidebooks.

A relative newcomer, Simon took up sea kayaking in 2003 as an experienced outdoor man and hill-walker escaping the overcrowded hills. Like others from a similar background, he has found sea kayaking to have many advantages. The ability to practice his new-found skills in magnificent scenery combines well with photography and the enjoyment of a varied wildlife; from seals and whales to sea birds, otters and deer.

Simon brings with him an enthusiasm and a desire to pass on the benefits of his experiences to others. Sea kayaking is currently enjoying a tremendous surge in numbers of participants. This, combined with the pace of modern life and its demand for instant information, if not at the touch of a button at least at the turn of a page, gives Simon the *raison d'être* for his guide. The Scottish Sea Kayak Trail contains almost all the practical knowledge required for the recommended trips.

While this book provides much valuable information, it should be regarded as just another item of equipment for the paddler and cannot replace good judgement. What is missing, quite deliberately, is the string of pearls along the trail. The identification of each perfect beach or campsite would create a honey pot effect and be bad for the environment.

It is better by far to enjoy the spirit of adventure and find your own pearls. There is no better place in the world to look than along the Scottish Sea Kayak Trail.

Duncan R. Winning OBE. HONORARY PRESIDENT, SCOTTISH CANOE ASSOCIATION.

Preface

It is the long journey that captures my imagination. While I've bagged my share of summits, I've always preferred the long-distance through-route to ticking off another top. Whether I've been carrying a rucksack or pedalling a bike, I have usually chosen the long way around. In 2002 I walked the length of the United States of America. Together with Liz, who subsequently agreed to marry me, we crossed baking deserts and snow-choked mountain passes following the 2,658 mile Pacific Crest Trail. That journey changed our lives in ways we are still discovering.

After five months continuous backpacking, we wanted to try a new sport, and turned to sea kayaking because it has the sense of journeying we enjoy so much.

Since then kayaking has become a major part of our lives. We have spent most of our free time exploring Scotland's west coast. We changed jobs and moved house to be closer to a prime kayaking area. Spending a summer paddling the length of the coast, so I could write this book, was an obvious progression.

So if you choose to undertake this long kayak journey, expect to move and think at a different pace. When things go wrong, the way you cope will be yet another part of the adventure.

I cannot guarantee the Scottish Sea Kayak Trail will change your life. But it might.

Simon Willis

About Simon and Liz

Thousands of sea kayakers around the world know Simon's voice from his podcast website (SeaKayakRoutes.com) and through his work as a correspondent with the BBC.

Liz was tackling a series of unclimbed peaks in Alaska when she met Simon and kept him on track when they hiked the length of the USA together, following the 2,658 mile wilderness Pacific Crest Trail from Mexico to Canada.

After five months backpacking, they turned to sea kayaking and became passionate advocates for the sport. They moved house and switched jobs so they could live and kayak on Scotland's west coast.

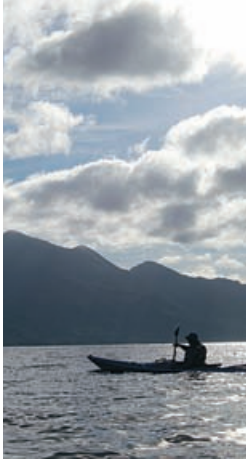
Simon makes adventure films and shoots videos for businesses. He contributes travel articles to newspapers, such as *The Sunday Times* and *The Herald*, as well as writing for specialist magazines. His work has appeared in all the UK's kayaking magazines.

Liz continues to keep Simon on track and endures being photographed more than most kayakers.





📷 Early morning in Sound of Sleat (page 117).



📷 Crossing Loch's heaven and hell (page 115).

📷 Skye's controversial bridge (page 119).



📷 The Jacobite doubles as the Hogwarts Express (page 113).



📷 Mallaig harbour (page 113).

Big Mountains, Big Seas

Section 3: Mallaig – Kyle of Lochalsh (47km)



OS Sheets:

40 & 33

Tide tables:

Ullapool

This is the most spectacular section of the entire Scottish Sea Kayak Trail. Strong kayakers might complete it in a single day, although most will take two or three days to enjoy the magnificent voyage. You may think of this section, not as a journey to undertake on its own, but as an addition to be tagged onto the end of Section 2 or the start of Section 4. Certainly, it is not to be missed.

Here you kayak through big mountain scenery. Across the water, the serrated peaks of the Skye Cuillin rise above the low-lying Sleat peninsula. On the mainland, the gnarly summit of Ladhar Bheinn (pronounced 'Larven') and the other hills of Knoydart dwarf the sea kayakers that pass beneath them. Occasional settlements, all of them remote, huddle at the mountains' feet, and tell a tragic history. This is a landscape that reinforces man's relatively minor place in the natural world, and through which it's a joy and privilege to travel.

Travel to the start

Mallaig is roughly three and three quarter hours drive north of Glasgow, and what a superb drive it is. Follow the A82 alongside Loch Lomond, then climb into the dramatic splendour of the highland mountains. The Black Mount, Rannoch Moor, and the awe inspiring Glen Coe make this a drive to savour. Once through Fort William, turn left onto the Road to the Isles and follow the A830 all the way to Mallaig. This road is gradually being improved but is always a longer drive than expected.

3.0 Mallaig

Mallaig is a busy port all year round and during summer becomes thronged with tourists, most of whom are trying to get somewhere else. CalMac ferries leave to the Small Isles of Muck, Rum, Canna and Eigg, as does the Skye ferry that crosses the Sound

of Sleat to Armadale. Add to these a variety of fishing and fish-farm vessels, other working boats, the Knoydart ferry and pleasure craft, and you're putting to sea in a small, crowded harbour.

There is also a bus and rail terminus where the 'Harry Potter' steam train ('The Jacobite') daily disgorges even more tourists in summer.

Facilities

There are numerous hotels and guest houses in Mallaig, but don't rely on the independent visitor information centre (☎ 01687 462064) to find accommodation. Sheena's Backpackers' Lodge (☎ 01687 462764 www.mallaigbackpackers.co.uk)

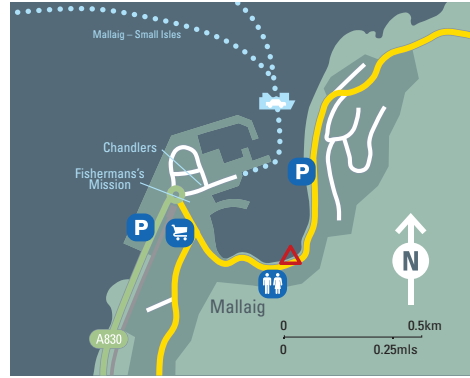
is near the harbour, tucked above a busy café with a lovely outdoor terrace. Immediately opposite is a medium supermarket with a small–medium supermarket up a neighbouring street, but if you're driving here, it's better value to buy supplies in the larger town of Fort William. Johnston Bros chandlery is on the pier (☎ 01687 462215). After they park their cars, The Small Isles' residents seem to wait for the return ferry in the café of the Fishermen's Mission (☎ 01687 462086), home to 'The best value food in Lochaber', it has been said.



It offers excellent cooked breakfasts until 11.30am, as well as scones, rolls and hot meals until 9pm during the week and until 12pm on Saturdays. They have showers and a laundry service. The outside of the building is rather austere and the inside functional rather than appealing, but the staff in this Christian charity café are friendly and helpful.

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Among all the activity, there's only one convenient place to launch a sea kayak and that's from the slipway in the south-east corner of the harbour. If you're starting the trail in Mallaig, then, as you drive into the town, turn right at the mini-roundabout, pass the visitor information centre and, as you pass some public toilets on the left, immediately pull into



one of the short-stay parking bays to unload. The slipway is directly in front. Once the kayaks and kit are safely on the slipway, drive further along the seafront and leave the vehicle in one of the long-stay parking bays, or head back to the mini roundabout, turn left, then right by the police station into another large car-park. Signs in this one proclaim 'No Overnight Parking', but residents of The Small Isles tend to leave their vehicles here for weeks on end. If you want to be certain your vehicle is correctly parked, pass on the details to Mallaig police station (☎ 01687 462177).



Two views of Mallaig harbour showing the slipway.



Additional information

There was a time in the early 1900s when, it is said, you could walk across Mallaig harbour without getting your feet wet. So many fishing boats were crammed behind the harbour wall, men would reach the shore by stepping from deck to deck. With up to nine men on each vessel, Mallaig was jumping with activity. Previously there had been only a handful of crofts here, huddled at the end of a forty-mile long rough track, until the railway arrived in 1901.

It nearly went somewhere else. Loch Nevis was initially the favoured site for the railway terminal. The west highland line had to reach the sea to bring back the fish caught off the Skye and the

Western Isles, and Loch Nevis offered deep, sheltered water. However, a study of the mountain landscape concluded it would be too difficult and costly for a railway line to be cut to Loch Nevis so, despite objections in Parliament that Mallaig would never make a safe harbour, it was chosen as the terminus.

So keen were crofters for the railway to come through, four hundred of them offered to work on its construction and devote a sixth of their wages to buying shares in the scheme. Although growth was limited by its location, squeezed between the railway and the sea, Mallaig boomed.



Cloven hoofed locusts

The failed rebellion of 1745 had far-reaching and long-lasting consequences. Clan chiefs who had risen against the crown forfeited their lands and, in so doing, lost much of their power. Absentee landowners took over, caring little for the people who lived on their estates, focused only on an economic return.

New hardy breeds of sheep appeared around 1760 and, gradually, the best land was given over to these animals. Human communities were pushed onto less fertile land where they clustered around the few spots where food would grow, turning these places into increasingly squalid townships. Some were offered free passage to Australia and Canada. When the 1845 potato famine hit, many were only too keen to sail away. The cruel irony was that people were starving at one end of the Glen, while at the other sheep enjoyed the fertile land. This was the Highland Clearances.

3.1 To Doune – (10km)

Wait until the large fishing vessels have stopped moving in the harbour, and with the VHF handy and tuned to Channel 16, leave quickly through the maze of pleasure craft, keeping close to the east shore. Your view will immediately be drawn to the mountains of the Skye Cuillin, which rise behind the bulk of the low-lying Sleat peninsula

(pronounced 'Slate'). Even better views lie around the corner. Keeping close to the coast, turn east into Loch Nevis and gaze up at the imposing mountains of Knoydart. This area suffered badly during the Highland Clearances with thousands of people evicted from their homes.

There is still no road into Knoydart, but the commu-

nity is recovering well. If you have time, the 12km diversion to visit Britain's most remote pub, The Old Forge at Inverie (☎ 01687 462267, www.theoldforge.co.uk) is recommended.

The trail reaches the cliffs of Sron Raineach, swings due north across the wide mouth of Loch Nevis, and makes the crossing, first to Glas Eilean and then to Eilean Dearg. Like Loch Hourn further

north, the mouth of Loch Nevis can be fearsomely rough. Sudden squalls blow down from the mountains and whip an otherwise moderate sea into a fury. If you need shelter, it can often be found in Sandaig Bay, not to be confused with the Sandaig Islands further north.

Continue around the steep coastline with no exits until you can escape into the bay at Doune.



No short cut

We tried cutting directly across the mouth of Loch Nevis to Glas Eilean. However, the south-westerly wind whipped up a surprisingly large beam sea, so we went with the waves, travelling a couple of kilometres east of Sron Raineach before heading across to shelter on the other side. We quickly found a campsite and by morning the sea was calm.

Facilities

A remote, rustic hotel is located at Doune and, provided you book in advance for dinner, the owners welcome sea kayakers to camp in the bay. Under Scottish access legislation, you should seek permission if you wish to wild camp within sight of people's houses; so talk to the hotel owners before you set camp in this bay. (☎ 01687 462667, www.doune-knoydart.co.uk)

Directions

Leave Mallaig, keeping close to the east shore and curve around into Loch Nevis as far as Sron Raineach. Tidal streams are weak across the wider part of Loch Nevis and Sound of Sleat. Off route, in the narrows heading for Inverie, they reach 0.5kn

at springs and there's a good detour into Inverie. If conditions permit, cross directly to Glas Eilean, then to Eilean Dearg. Follow the steep coastline around and escape into the bay at Doune.



Loch Nevis

In stream starts +0515 HW Ullapool

Out stream starts -0105 0.5kn springs in narrows

Sound of Sleat

NE stream starts +0535 HW Ullapool

SW stream starts -0025 1kn springs

Additional information

The great mountain landscape of the Knoydart is frequently described as a wilderness yet, less than

two hundred years ago, more than a thousand people lived in stone houses along the edge of the sea lochs where they survived by farming and fishing. Knoydart is one of the parts of Scotland where the clearances were ruthlessly effective with almost every family being removed to make way for sheep.

Today, much of the peninsula is owned by the Knoydart Foundation, a partnership of local residents, council and trusts. Although only accessible by boat, the sole village, Inverie, has a growing population of around one hundred people. There is a post office, primary school, B&Bs, bunkhouse and inn.



📷 Until 1853 this was probably a family home.



Knoydart cleared

During the Highland Clearances, the large Knoydart estate was under the management of trustees, its owner having died while his son was too young to assume the responsibility of running the estate. People had been gradually cleared from the estate when, in 1853, the trustees decided to evict them all.

More than three hundred people decided to accept the offer of free passage to Canada on board the *Sillery*, under the condition that their homes were demolished. Those crofters who refused to emigrate were evicted and their houses destroyed. Around thirty people, with nowhere to go, built rough shelters. These were also pulled down, repeatedly, and although some were still squatting

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on the estate in the summer of 1855, they eventually had to abandon the unequal struggle. When the Knoydart Estate was sold in 1857 almost all of it was under sheep, frequently referred to as 'cloven-hoofed locusts' or 'the white plague'.

In 1948, an unsuccessful land raid was undertaken by the so-called 'Seven Men of Knoydart'. They attempted to claim ownership of enough land to farm but their case was eventually rejected by the Secretary of State for Scotland. A cairn commemorating the land raid stands in Inverie.

3.2 Sandaig Islands (17km)

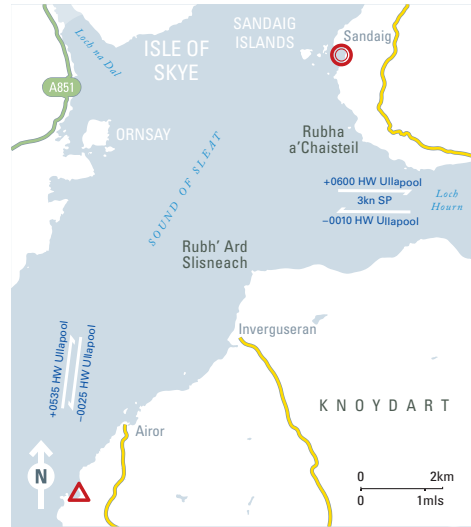
Crossing Loch Nevis was a foretaste of what crossing Loch Hourn might be like. Nevis means 'Heaven', Hourn means 'Hell', so if the first was rough, you might want to delay setting out across the second. North from Doune are even more remote houses, some clustered together in the community at Aior, others scattered along the low-lying shore.

When you reach Rubha Ard Slisneach, if the sea ahead is calm and you are enjoying a tail wind and riding the flood tide, then consider striking out on the 6km crossing directly to the Sandaig Islands. Otherwise, enter Loch Hourn as far as the narrows at Rubha an Daraich and cut directly across to Glas Eilean. The tidal streams are weak here but if the wind is blowing against them, they can still become choppy.

Curve around the coast to the beautiful Sandaig Islands which are popular with sea kayakers, other boaters and walkers so are somewhat over-used for camping. Avoid camping here.

Directions

From Doune follow the coast north. If the sea is calm, head directly across to the Sandaig Islands. If slightly choppy, head deeper into Loch Hourn and cross between Rubha an Daraich and Glas Eilean. If very choppy, consider landing and delaying crossing until the tide turns, the weather improves or both.



Loch Hourn

In stream starts +0600 HW Ullapool

Out stream starts -0010 HW Ullapool, weak but 3kn spring in narrows.

Sound of Sleat

NE stream starts +0535 HW Ullapool

SW stream starts -0025 HW Ullapool, 1kn springs and 2kn off Sandaig Islands.

Additional information

One of the most popular wildlife books of the last century was written on the coast alongside these islands. The Scottish aristocrat, naturalist and shark-hunter Gavin Maxwell lived at Sandaig when

in 1960 he wrote *Ring of Bright Water* about how he brought an otter back from Iraq and raised it here. Sandaig was called 'Camusfearna' in the book, which sold over a million copies and was made into a movie starring Virginia McKenna in 1969. Maxwell's house at Sandaig burned down in 1968 and he moved to Eilean Ban, the island occupied by a lighthouse under the Skye Bridge. Maxwell

planned to write a book about British wild mammals and build a zoo on the island, but died from cancer the following year. The Eilean Ban Trust (☎ 01599 530040, www.eileanban.org) runs the Bright Water Visitor Centre at Kyleakin. Today there's a white house at Sandaig that is falling into disrepair, and nearby a simple monument marks the site of Camusfearna where Maxwell's ashes are buried.



Why land ownership matters

Leading up to the Highland Clearances, most of the land was owned by absentee landlords who rarely visited and left the running of the estates to their foremen, known as 'factors'. These powerful men gradually took upon themselves most other public offices in their administrative districts and acquired almost untouchable power. One man could be factor, banker and Justice of the Peace, becoming virtually above the law.

Stories are told of cruel factors who would raise a crofter's rent by sixpence on every occasion he didn't touch his cap as a sign of respect to them. Their assistants, so called 'ground-officers', frequently came from crofting families, and were often despised more than the factor himself.

When the landlords decided sheep would be less trouble than people, the factors set about clearing the people with whom they had grown up.

It's easy to see why land ownership remains a powerful issue in Scotland to this day. The Land Reform Bill was one of the first introduced to the Scottish Parliament and, as well as enshrining a right of responsible access (see Overnight), it established rights for communities like Gigha to buy their own land.



📍 Gavin Maxwell's house was near here on Sandaig Islands.

SCOTTISH SEA KAYAK TRAIL

SIMON WILLIS

Scotland's west coast is a truly world-class sea kayaking destination. This 500km trail, from the Isle of Gigha off the Kintyre peninsula, to the Summer Isles near Ullapool, is the best way to explore the highlights of this magnificent coastline. It can be undertaken in four holiday-sized sections or as one long, glorious journey.

Here you will find all the information you need to plan and make the most of your own adventure, including:

- [How to tackle tricky passages](#)
- [Essential tidal stream data](#)
- [Places to rest or shelter from storms](#)
- [Bad weather alternatives](#)
- [Where to find provisions](#)
- [How and when to shuttle vehicles](#)

There are useful photographs and notes to help identify wildlife, plus practical advice on wild camping. There is no better way to travel amongst these wild places than by kayak.

The national history of Scotland is inextricably linked to the west coast, from the earliest voyagers to Norsemen, the Lords of the Isles to the Clearances. A historical thread, woven through the book, tells Scotland's story.

For those who travel the trail from the comfort of an armchair, there is also the story of the author's own journey. Together you will travel under big skies on imposing seas in the company of seals, dolphins, eagles and gulls.

**THE SCOTTISH SEA KAYAK
TRAIL AWAITS YOU.**

