

Foreword

From the mainland, Arran is only a dozen miles across the Firth of Clyde, but on stepping ashore at Brodick pier, you feel as though you're entering an older, more peaceful world. The island has always held a special significance for me. It was while descending from the granite slabs of the A'Chir ridge over 50 years ago that I decided I wanted a job that would allow me to spend the rest of my life climbing mountains. The sun-kissed hills of Arran richly blessed me that day, as many times since.

Whilst Arran has always attracted climbers, some walkers are overawed by the steep, narrow ridges and soaring pinnacles of the island's northern mountains. Many would rather tackle something less dramatic, but still challenging enough to make an adventure. And so the Isle of Arran Coastal Way was conceived.

Arran's geology makes it ideal for coastal walking. The shallow coastal fringe of its raised beach encircles the island, and the Coastal Way follows it closely, seldom diverting inland. Whilst much of the route follows footpaths and stretches of beach, parts involve road-walking, albeit a very quiet and pleasant road, mostly on the west of the island. The Way has evolved and improved greatly over the years since I revisited Arran to open it in March 2003.

My own favourite section remains the toughest route option, from Kildonan to Whiting Bay past Dippin Head. No footpath tames this section, although all difficulties can be bypassed by heading inland from Kildonan on the main Way. With steep cliffs on one side and open sea on the other, there's something very satisfying in the uncompromising nature of the terrain. Rocky reefs run out towards the little lighthouse island of Pladda. This is rugged coastal walking at its finest.

Cameron McNeish



1 Planning and preparation

Best time of year

In theory, the Arran Coastal Way could be an all-year route because snow and ice are unlikely except on the high ground, even in winter. In practice, few would choose to walk it between November and February because of short hours of daylight, likely poor weather and limited accommodation.

In between, July/August tend to be busier months because of school holidays. The weather is apt to be drier in May/June, and September/October can be a good choice. The weather can be very changeable at any time of year: get a forecast before setting out each day (see page 75) and, if in doubt, be prepared for all four seasons in one day!

Gradient and terrain

The Way encircles the island in a 65-mile (105-km) loop that lies mainly at or near sea-level, with no serious altitude gains unless you opt for the shoulder or summit of Goat Fell: see page 38. In the first section, the main Way is low-level, barely breaking the 150 m contour on its way through Merkland Wood, and in poor weather this makes a better, as well as an easier, choice. However, on a fine day many will regard the panorama from the roof of Arran (874 m/2867 ft) as a highlight of their expedition.

The only other climb on the main Way is to about 200 m (660 ft) on the inland route from Kildonan to Whiting Bay. You might imagine that this makes it more strenuous than the coastal option – which stays at sea level and is 2 km shorter. Nothing could be further from the truth! Walking on Arran soon makes you realise that picking your way among boulders can be much more demanding – and slower going – than an extended climb on a firm surface, where you can get a rhythm going.

Across Brodick Bay to Goat Fell





The Way traverses a wide range of terrain, from tarmac road with grassy verge to tidal beaches with a mixture of boulders, shingle and sand. Rock-hopping across tidal beaches is not only slow, but also demands some agility and care, especially in the wet. The main Way goes over boulder-fields in two main places – An Scriodan (page 43) and around Bennan Head (page 59), with Dippin Head making an optional third (page 65). There is nothing to deter a walker of normal mobility, but allow yourself plenty of time and be sure to check the tide times: see page 10.

There are also some constructed paths, forest roads and hillside tracks where normal progress can be made. Depending on the recent weather and state of the tide, in places you'll have to take care to avoid wet feet. On tarmac, you may prefer trainers to boots, and on sandy beaches you may wish for crocs or bare feet.

The percentage of road-walking is high in two sections, 3-4 and 3-5 (see Table 1), albeit along a scenic main road that carries fairly sparse traffic.

 Walk on the right-hand side so as to face oncoming traffic, and take to the verge or beach whenever suitable. Stay alert, especially near blind corners, and be prepared for the odd large vehicle. Although the road around the island is technically an A-road only between Lochranza and Whiting Bay, it is the only coastal road around the rest of the island, so be aware of traffic.

South across Drumadoon Bay



Direction, days and stages

We recommend walking the Way anti-clockwise. When road-walking, this puts you next to the shore, making it easy to take to the beach where preferable, and giving unobstructed sea views. We describe the Way starting from Brodick because that's where the ferry arrives, but you can start anywhere, or indeed complete it in sections as day walks, or spread it over a couple of long weekends.

We present the walk in seven sections in Part 3; Table 1 shows the daily distances. Consider allowing more than seven days for your holiday. For example, you may want at least a day to see the sights of Brodick (see pages 31-33) or to visit the Holy Isle: see page 23.

Or you may want to take a day off walking, especially if the weather is poor. Conversely, in great weather, you may want the chance to explore the mountainous interior.

However, if you've only a week to spare, you can shorten the walk by a day or two. Combining the first two sections makes for a very long day (17.6 mi/28.3 km), but is feasible for fit walkers who make an early start.

Table 1

Distances for the Way over seven sections

	<i>miles</i>	<i>km</i>	<i>pages</i>
Brodick			
3-2	7.8	12.6	35-39
Sannox			
3-3	9.8	15.7	40-45
Lochranza			
3-4	8.9	14.3	46-50
Imachar			
3-5	10.0	16.1	51-55
Blackwaterfoot			
3-6	6.6	10.7	56-58
Lagg			
3-7	11.3	18.3	59-66
Whiting Bay			
3-8	10.9	17.5	67-73
Brodick			
Total	65.3	105.2	

Distances are measured along the route of the main Way; alternatives differ in length



You could save a further day by combining the third and fourth sections, going from Lochranza to Blackwaterfoot, perhaps using the bus or other transport to skip up to 10 miles (16 km) of road-walking between Catacol and the King's Cave car park. To include some splendid off-road walking, take the Coire Lochan side-trip from Thundergay: see page 49. You might then use transport to Machrie, and perhaps complete the Stone Circles walk (page 18) and finish with the splendid King's Cave walk to Blackwaterfoot.

However, many people will find deep satisfaction in simply following the main Way to circumnavigate this beautiful island. A word of warning: when you are planning your trip, don't be misled by the modest distances in the table. Arran terrain makes for slow progress. Some off-road sections involve slow, tiring boulder-hopping, and in a couple of places there is no safe passage at high tide: see pages 10 and 59. Before deciding your schedule, think through some constraints on timing:

- hours of daylight
- tide times
- tough terrain
- (unless supported by a driver) the bus timetable.

Accommodation

Where you spend your overnights is another factor. Nowhere on Arran is much more than half an hour away from Brodick by car. In theory, if you plan carefully from the bus timetable, you could stay in Brodick or Whiting Bay for your entire holiday, using the bus to reach the start, and return from the finish, of each day's walk.

However, there's a choice of interesting hotels and B&Bs in many villages on the Way, and it would be a pity to miss staying in places such as Lochranza, Blackwaterfoot, Lagg, Kildonan and Lamlash. Budget options include bunkhouses, hostels and five campsites: see the table below.

A good compromise might be to spend nights in each of two or three places, using the bus as needed, reducing the need to carry overnight stuff while walking. Since there's no accommodation at Imachar, after section 3-4 you would need to stay elsewhere, for example Lochranza, Pirnmill or Blackwaterfoot. As we go to press, the hotels in Lochranza and Sannox are both on the market but may reopen in 2021 and 2022 respectively.

Table 2: Accommodation and facilities

NB many of these have restricted opening hours and are open in season only: check ahead before relying on any.

	<i>map page</i>	<i>B&B/hotel</i>	<i>hostel / bunkhouse</i>	<i>campsite</i>	<i>pub/café</i>	<i>food shop, carryout</i>
Brodick	37	✓	✓	<i>within ✓1½ miles</i>	✓	✓
Corrie	37	✓			✓	
Sannox	37	✓			✓	
Lochranza	42	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Pirnmill	47	✓			✓	✓
Machrie (golf club)	53				✓	
Blackwaterfoot	57	✓		<i>within ✓2 miles</i>	✓	✓
Lagg	60	✓			✓	
Kilmory	60		✓		✓	
Kildonan	61	✓		✓		
Whiting Bay	63	✓			✓	✓
Lamlash	69	✓		<i>within ✓1 mile</i>	✓	✓