



Get away for... **THE WEEKEND!**

Bute, with its colourful gardens, grand architecture and beautiful bays is ideal for a short break!

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An island that boasts a Victorian public convenience as an attraction is a tad unusual, but almost everyone who visits the Isle of Bute pops into this wee venue! A short ferry ride off the southwest coast of Scotland in the Firth of Clyde, Bute is only 15 miles long and yet has much more to offer than a historic and remarkable sanitary facility.

We had been visiting friends near Loch Lomond and opted for the short ferry trip from Colintrave to Rhubodach on the northern tip of Bute, rather than the more popular 35-minute crossing to Rothesay. Perfect for anyone who isn't a great sailor, this voyage is over almost before you've realised the crew have cast off. We parked by the Rhubodach ferry terminal and sipped a morning coffee sitting on the sunny shore watching black guillemots and eider ducks.

The West Island Way is a 30-mile-long waymarked footpath around Bute and, from Rhubodach, we followed a section of this trail to Balnakeilly Bay and beyond into woodland full of sweet-smelling bluebells, primroses and celandines and pungent wild garlic. At the ruins of the deserted village of Balnakeilly, a path through pine trees took us to a World War II bunker, used to coordinate decoy lights and fires designed to draw enemy bombers away from Glasgow. Today this is a great viewpoint over the Kyles of Bute towards the Scottish mainland; below us were the Burnt Islands and the colourfully named Buttock Point.

Back in our 'van we followed the coast road south to Bute's main town, Rothesay. Parking by the promenade, we sought out Cafe Zavaroni for ice creams. Rothesay was where the (late) singer Lena Zavaroni was ►

Why?... To explore a small island that packs in plenty of interest, variety and colour



MAIN Walking above Kilchattan Bay

FAR LEFT The rhododendrons at Mount Stuart House

BELOW LEFT Rothesay harbour

BELOW RIGHT Fountain on Rothesay promenade



US AND OUR 'VAN



Carol Kubicki...

and her husband, Anthony, use their Devon Tempest to pursue their outdoor hobbies of walking and cycling



2015 Devon Tempest on a Renault Master. At 5.5m we think it's enormous and, with a washroom, also luxurious

brought up and Cafe Zavaroni is run by Lena's cousin. We ate our ice creams strolling around the putting green, serenaded by recordings of Scottish dancing music, before setting off in search of those Victorian toilets.

It is the men's toilets that are the highlight as, interestingly, the Victorians made no provision for ladies. The toilets are still in use and the attendant took our money and checked it was clear for me to view the gents. Built in Bute's heyday of 1899, the fittings were meant to impress and I stepped inside a room with an intricate mosaic floor, decorative tiles, ceramic urinals, shiny copper pipes and ornate marble-patterned basins.

Unusually, Rothesay Castle is now tucked behind the buildings lining the seafront. Originally built on the coast in the thirteenth century as defence against invading Norwegians, the castle was restored in the nineteenth century and a wide promenade created on reclaimed land.

The circular fortification is unique in Scotland, with a high curtain wall, four towers and a moat around it that is crossed by a bridge to an impressive gatehouse. We climbed staircases to the towers and then descended to the dismal pit prison.

The Victorians came to Rothesay in their

droves, arriving from Glasgow on paddle steamers to sit in a deck chair on the beach, watch Punch and Judy shows or enjoy a little dancing. Many took the tram from Rothesay to the crescent-shaped sandy beach of Ettrick Bay on the island's west coast.

As we left the castle it started to spit with rain, so we clambered back into the 'van and followed the old route of the Victorian trams to Ettrick Bay for an overnight stop with a sea view.

The sun soon broke through the morning mist next day and we parked at Kilchattan Bay for a five-mile circular section of the West Island Way to St Blane's Church. The rocky coastline was colourful with tiny blue common milkwort, bright pink thrift and lousewort, yellow marsh marigolds, aromatic gorse and delicate wood anemone.

The air was full of bird song: the piercing calls of oystercatchers and noisy herring gulls were joined by wheatears, rock pipits and stonechats. Looking out to sea, we watched dolphins sliding through the water ahead of a sailing boat.

We walked under the protruding rock known as Hawk's Nib (meaning beak) to the lighthouse at Rubhian Eun and the picturesque Glencallum Bay. Here we relaxed on warm rocks gazing out to the islands of Great and Little Cumbrae.

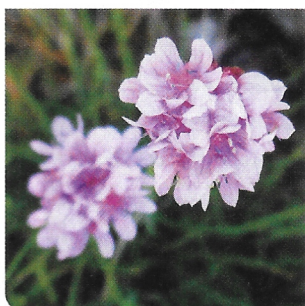
PARKING

Asvog Gardens has a small car park that was fine for our campervan but motorhomes over 19ft long should park in Balmory Road just 100 yards south of the gardens

The parking at Kilchattan Bay is at the end of the road where there's also a turning area

RIGHT St Blane's Chapel is set in a leafy dell

BELOW Pink thrift flowers on the coast of Bute



We continued on the circular trail, climbing up the grassy slopes above the bay and ate our picnic on the cliffs overlooking Arran. Turning inland we reached an unusual knobbly landscape of secret valleys and small hills with the reed-filled Loch na Leighe nestling among them.

Beyond is St Blane's Church, a walled ruin beautifully set in a leafy dell and with remains from two eras. The early Christian monastery and home of St Blane is thought to be a forerunner to the monastery on Iona. Viking raids in the eighth century led to the monastery being abandoned and the cult of St Blane moved to Dunblane (meaning fortified hill of Blane) near Stirling.

Inside the enclosure wall is a twelfth century chapel that was used until the Protestant Reformation. Leaving Anthony to explore the chapel, I followed a sunken path to a lower graveyard within the walls that was restricted to burials for women.

We drove around Bute's west coast, stopping at the pretty Scalpsie Bay before reaching Ettrick Bay for ice creams enjoyed whilst listening to the rolling of waves on the golden sand.

Bute's only campsite is high above Rothesay on Canada Hill and we walked in to town following the zig-zags of the Serpentine Road that is straight out of a San

Francisco postcard. The following morning we tackled the steep hill again to visit the small Bute Museum packed with entertaining photographs and memorabilia of Bute as a Victorian seaside resort.

Bute's jewel in the crown is Mount Stuart House, a Victorian Neo-Gothic house brimming with fantastical features. Now a visitor attraction and wedding venue, the house was originally built for the third Marquess of Bute.


The focus of this grand house is a magnificent central hallway of exquisite marble. Our guide helped us appreciate the details of the design that reflects an interest in the stars, with crystal constellations in the roof, signs of the zodiac in stained glass and coloured lighting to represent the seasons. With intricate carvings and more flourishes and features than you can absorb in one visit, this is a stunning space.

The house was a trend-setter for the late nineteenth century with en-suite bathrooms that are still used by newlyweds. In the opulent marble chapel I chatted to two women who were regulars. They told me, "We see different rooms each time we come and learn something fresh on every visit."

Mount Stuart sits in 300 acres of formal gardens and woodland that are worthy of such an impressive house. We strolled ➤

INFORMATION

Only 33 miles from Glasgow (as the crow flies)

 visitbute.com


Inspired by art, mythology and astrology

 mountstuart.com


Visit Britain's oldest exotic fern

 ascogfernerly.com

A group of 20 gardens across Argyll and Bute

 gardens-of-argyll.co.uk

Get the ferry – note due to coronavirus, you can't book a new ferry crossing with CalMac until 16 July. The service is running for essential travel only as we went to press.

 calmac.co.uk

BELOW Glencallum Bay is a perfect place to mess about in rock pools

ESSENTIALS

HOW LONG

Three nights

WHEN

We visited in May

HOW MUCH

Fuel Average 34mpg (630 miles).....**£112**

Ferry Return for a sub-6m motorhome.....**£17**

Site fees.....**£28**

Entrance fees

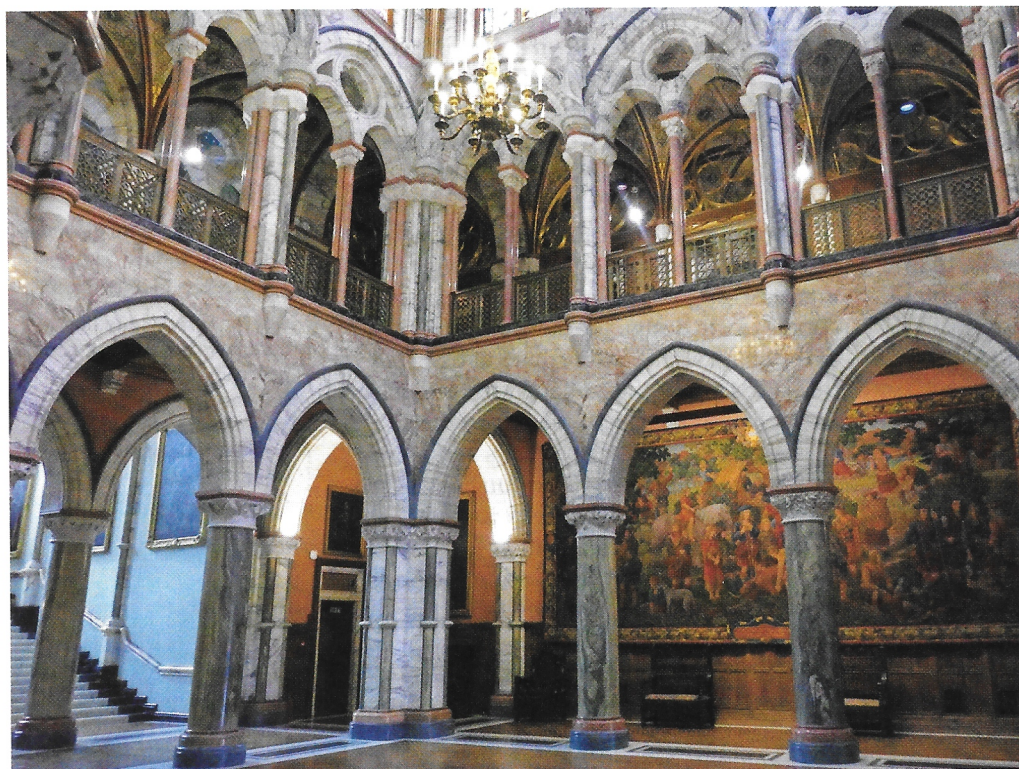
Rothesay Museum, Victorian toilets, Ascog Hall Garden and Fernery, Rothesay Castle, Mount Stuart House.....**£56.80**

TOTAL.....£213.80



Must do... Pack a picnic and walk from Kilchattan Bay to Glencallum Bay so you can enjoy the stunning coastal scenery along the way

Must see... Mount Stuart House for its awe-inspiring marble central hall and magnificent colourful gardens



through the kitchen garden glasshouse admiring the exotic plants and followed avenues lined with colourful rhododendrons. For me the most dazzling sight was the shimmering carpet of bluebells stretching as far as I could see.

Driving back along the coast from Mount Stuart we stopped at the lovely bay of Kerrycroy. Here, an attractive group of model houses fronted by a green, a beach and a small harbour were built for Mount Stuart estate workers. Brewing up in the 'van, with the sliding door wide open, we watched a seal perched on a nearby rock.

On our final day on the island we packed in two more gardens as well as a woodland walk. Parking at Craigmore, the headland beyond Rothesay, we walked up the hillside to Ardenraig Gardens: a sheltered and walled garden and greenhouses that are all that remain of the gardens of Ardenraig House. Following a path through Bogany Wood, above the Victorian houses and hotels along the coast, we admired the wild garlic and bluebells and watched the ferry arrive below us.


Driving along the lovely eastern coast

road that weaves in and out of small bays we reached Ascog Hall Garden and Fernery.

The hall isn't open to the public, but the gardens have an old-fashioned charm and magical atmosphere with beds of colourful flowers and water features. The sunken Victorian Fernery was built in 1875 and in this green, warm and damp environment you will find Britain's oldest exotic fern, claimed to be more than 1,000 years old.

I found Ascog delightful. There were flowering bright blue poppies, vibrant azaleas and rhododendrons and luxuriant tree ferns. Paths wind among the flower beds making the gardens feel larger. Occasional amusing sculptures add to the fun: a gardener with a watering can, a swimmer diving into the pond and an umbrella-carrying figure with a fountain flowing from the top of the broly.


The Isle of Bute was known as the 'Madeira of Scotland', before cheap flights to the Atlantic island were an option. With so many gardens and wild flowers on Bute more than lived up to this advertising pitch.


Bute's certainly worth visiting for a few days – and spending more than a penny! 


ABOVE CLOCKWISE The magnificent central hallway at Mount Stuart House; Colourful bird of paradise flower at Mount Stuart House; Rothesay Castle


THE CAMPSITE


Roseland Holiday Park,
Canada Hill, Rothesay, Isle of
Bute PA20 9EH

 01700 501840

 roselandlodgepark.co.uk

 Mid March – 7 January

 Two adults, pitch and
electric: From £20
(showers extra)

This feature was written prior to the coronavirus pandemic. We are publishing it for your enjoyment and to help you plan future trips. Readers must follow the latest government advice before leaving their homes  [gov.uk/coronavirus](https://www.gov.uk/coronavirus)