

Mull of Kintyre

Carol and Anthony explore beautiful beaches, castles and other curiosities on an island that isn't an island...



Skipness Castle still has a tower you can climb



Carol Kubicki
Travel writer

2015 Renault Master MWB

Conversion type Devon Tempest,
by Devon Conversions
devonconversions.co.uk

Owned since 2015 (from new)

Engine 2.3-litre diesel

Power 130bhp

Gearbox 6-speed manual

Fuel economy 33 – 37mpg

Berths 2

Insurance cost £700 (Safeguard)

WHAT WE LOVE ABOUT IT

This is our third blue campervan and our second Devon conversion. We call it the Blue Bus. At 5.5m long, I still think it is enormous and, with a washroom, also luxurious

Standing on the ferry's deck, we spotted porpoises sliding through the water and spectacular gannets diving for fish before the boat sailed into Tarbert's sheltered harbour. I knew the ferry was the best way to bring our campervan, the 'Blue Bus', to the Kintyre Peninsula but, be warned, your brain might think you've arrived on an island!

The attractive village of Tarbert, strung around the waterfront, has smart gift shops and cafés, topped off by a medieval castle; we parked our 'van and explored. Today, the castle is managed by the community and a woodland sculpture park has been created within its grounds.

The Kintyre Peninsula is a 40-mile long finger of land in southwest Scotland, and the Mull of Kintyre, at the southern tip, points towards nearby Northern Ireland.

The peninsula is narrow enough to give sea views most of the time and, with quiet roads, that island feeling didn't go away.

Big Jessie's Tearoom came highly recommended via Facebook and didn't disappoint. We scoffed home-made cake and cups of tea with a sea view and chatted to the friendly family who own it. At the ferry terminal for the Isle of Gigha, Big Jessie's has a field where we could park. Opening our big 'van door, there was just a beach between us and the Atlantic, and a golden sunset over Gigha was the icing on the cake.

The community-owned Isle of Gigha is only seven miles long and bikes were the best way to explore. After coffee in a café on a picturesque bay with turquoise-blue sea, we headed south to the luxuriant Achamore Gardens. We strolled along the maze of woodland paths lined with flowering bushes and sat in the sheltered walled gardens, breathing in the scents and listening to the birdsong. Cycling to the northern tip of the island against a headwind was worth the effort for the sandy bays and views of the distinctive Paps of Jura, and we flew back to catch the ferry wind-assisted!

Walking on water

Popular with walkers, windsurfers and beachcombers, the splendid beach at Machrihanish, on the Atlantic Coast, is over three miles long and edged with dunes. Our campsite was just a short stroll from these magnificent sands. We walked by the coast and beyond the village and sat on

balancing on rocky outcrops.

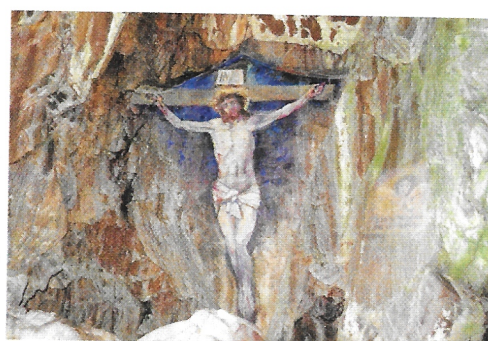
Campbeltown, once the 'whisky capital' with 34 distilleries, is on the opposite coast and just a short bus ride from our campsite. We explored the town, which today has three distilleries and is a busy fishing port, and found the sheltered Linda McCartney Memorial Garden. Linda and Paul McCartney had regular family holidays in Kintyre and wrote the 1970s hit, 'Mull of Kintyre' in tribute to the area. That tune promptly lodged itself in my head and became an exasperating earworm morning, noon and night!

Three hours either side of low tide, you can walk out to Davaar Island from Campbeltown along a causeway. We waited for the path to appear and followed a family along the pebbly spit of land covered in seaweed and shells with flocks of oystercatchers and terns sweeping around us. The sea receded to our left and right, making me feel as if the tides were parting just for us.

On the island, we scrambled around the coast all looking for the same thing – the cave with the painting. The children excitedly ran into each cave, returning disappointed. Eventually finding the right one, I was pleased to see they were organised enough to bring torches. On a wall of the narrow dark cave, we found an astonishingly vibrant painting of the crucifixion, painted secretly in the nineteenth century by local artist, called Archibald MacKinnon.

A secret bay

Anthony drove the Blue Bus at a leisurely pace on the winding, narrow road north from Campbeltown. After a particularly sharp bend we reached the hamlet of Saddell and pulled in. There isn't much left to see of Saddell Abbey but what is worth stopping for is the remarkable collection of medieval grave slabs carved with beautifully detailed images of animals and weapons. Three stones have impressive life-size effigies of the lords whose grave they marked, each proudly dressed in full armour.



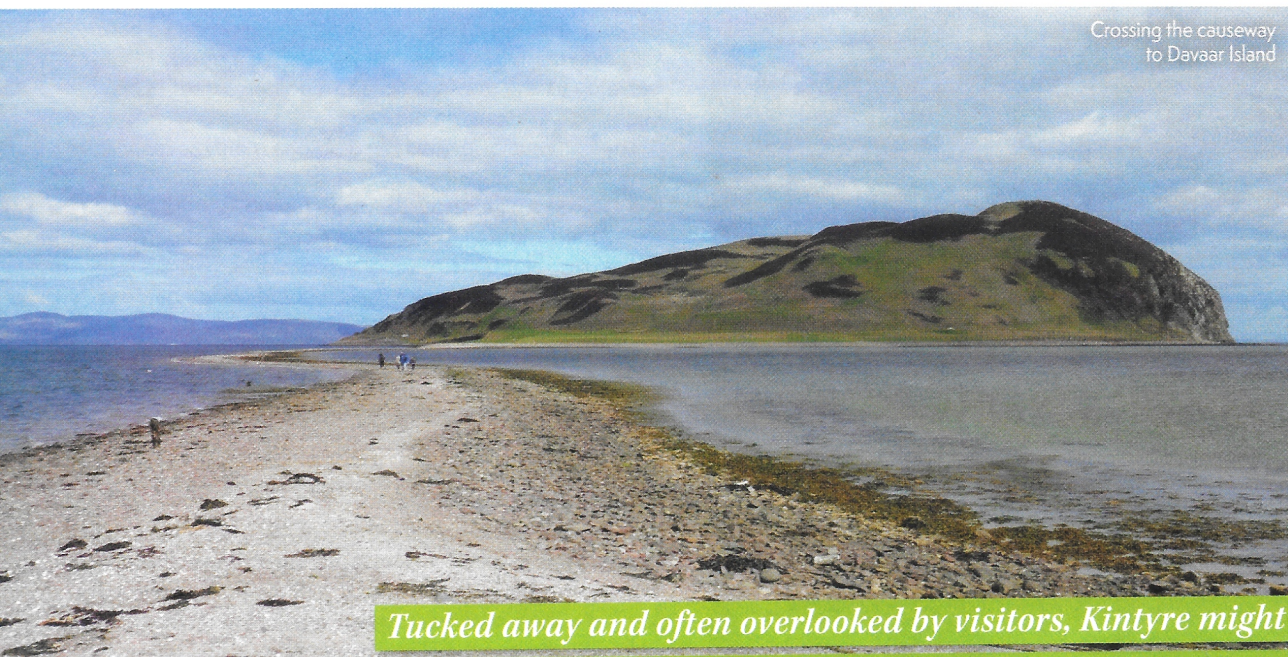
After making fresh coffee in the campervan, we walked through woodland to Saddell's hidden bay. This picturesque white sandy beach is overlooked by a castle (that is available to rent) and an Anthony Gormley statue. If you are of a certain age, you might recognise Saddell Bay from the 'Mull of Kintyre' video. I lay on the bordering grassland, dotted with wildflowers, listening to the splashes each time a gannet dived in the bay and we decided this was a perfect spot for some tai chi practice.

We explored the coast further north and picked up part of the Kintyre Way to climb Cnoc nan Gabhar; at the top, we sat in sunshine, watching rain showers moving across the sea. That evening, we cooked up a feast in the 'van, with a view across Carradale Bay.

At Skipness, we walked to another ruined castle – this one, gratifyingly substantial, with a tower that visitors can climb, and we walked through Skipness' woodland admiring the carpets of bluebells and wild garlic.

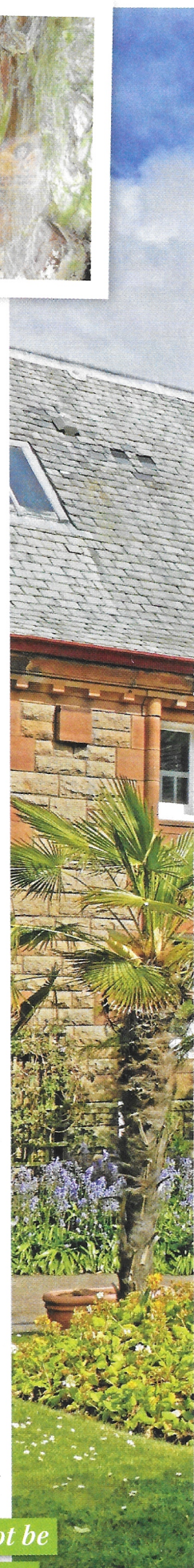
Cycling on the level

The Crinan Canal opened early in the nineteenth century, creating an attractive shortcut for boats across the Kintyre Peninsula. Just nine miles long, today, the canal towpath is popular for cycling and walking. The lovely town of Lochgilphead, beside the canal, has a campsite that made an ideal cycling base. After catching up on our washing in the industrial-size laundry the campsite operates for campers and locals, we 'unleashed the beasts,' as Anthony always says as he takes the bikes off the rack.



Crossing the causeway to Davaar Island

Tucked away and often overlooked by visitors, Kintyre might not be



The peaceful Linda McCartney Memorial Garden in Campbeltown

FAR LEFT A well-balanced seal at Machrihanish

LEFT Inside a cave we found this vibrant painting of the crucifixion



The Crinan Canal is fantastic for cycling



The Blue Bus with a beach view by Big Jessie's Tearoom

The canal is easy off-road cycling with pretty lock-keeper cottages, swing bridges and passing boats. Through the Knapdale Forest, where you can look for signs of the reintroduced beavers, we cycled on undulating lanes to the scenic coastal village of Tayvallich. Another day, we cycled to the charming village of Crinan, at the end of the canal and where the loch gates into the Atlantic are marked by a tiny lighthouse.

We returned from Crinan via Kilmartin Glen, cycling on the arrow-straight single-track road across the Moine Mhor. This desolate protected raised bog is fringed by saltmarsh and contrasts with the lush Knapdale woodland. Kilmartin Glen is an extraordinary Scottish landscape, packed with stone circles and chambered cairns. We explored Temple Wood Stone Circle, built around 5,000 years ago – an enchanting place where sunshine and showers only added to the magic.

Feeling weary after a long day of cycling, we decided to skip cooking and eat in Lochgilphead. The Argyll Café might look like an unpromising old-fashioned eatery but the friendly staff served up excellent pizzas and delicious desserts that totally hit the spot.

Tucked away and often overlooked by visitors, Kintyre might not be an island but its quiet roads make it perfect for a campervan tour. Make the detour and you will find a relaxed corner of Scotland full of curiosities and lovely scenery just waiting to be discovered.



MACHRIHANISH HOLIDAY PARK Machrihanish, Campbeltown, Argyll PA28 6PT campkintyre.com

CARRADALE BAY CARAVAN PARK Carradale Estate, Carradale, Campbeltown, Argyll PA28 6QG carradalebay.com

LOCHGILPHEAD CARAVAN PARK Bank Park, Lochgilphead, Argyll PA31 8NX lochgilpheadcaravanpark.com