



The scenic route

Travel beyond the tourist trail to discover the fascinating origins of Oban

Time: 40 - 60 mins

Distance: 1 ½ miles

Landscape: coastal

Located halfway along Scotland's west coast, Oban is often called 'the Gateway to the Isles'.

In summer months this small town's population explodes as tourists pass through on ferries and flights to the Hebrides, Highlands and Glasgow.

There is another story though beyond travel and transience.

This trail uncovers the town's dramatic origins. Find out how fire, ice and water created a unique landscape and discover for yourself why Oban is much more than just a route to other places.

Location:

Oban, Argyll and Bute, Scotland

Start:

Oban taxi rank, Station Road, PA34 4LN

Finish:

The Dog Stone, Ganavan Road

Grid reference:

NM 85837 29919

Keep an eye out for:

Various seabirds feeding in the bay

Directions



The trail starts from Oban taxi rank, located at Station Road near the railway station and ferry terminal. From the train station or ferry terminal, head towards the town centre with the sea on your left. The taxi rank is across the road from the town clock tower (set in a small roundabout) at the end of Station Road.



Route and stopping points



- 01 View of Oban bay from Station Road taxi rank
- 02 Oban Distillery and McCaig's Tower
- 03 View of Kerrera from North Pier
- 04 View of the South Pier from the A85 roundabout
- 05 Oban War Memorial, Corran Esplanade
- 06 The Dog Stone, Corran Esplanade

01 View of Oban bay from Station Road taxi rank

We begin where most people first encounter Oban – the South Pier. This is where the town's many visitors arrive and depart by rail, road or ferry.

The town's name is from the Gaelic for 'little bay'. Look along the horseshoe-shaped coastline from here and it's easy to see why. Oban's natural bay is a clue to its first fortunes. The town originated as a fishing village. Its location, facing the Atlantic but sheltered by the Hebrides islands, is the perfect habitat for all sorts of fish - and a safe place to catch them. Oban's diverse fish stocks led to Britain's first mussel farm being established 3 miles away at Loch Etive.

Turn towards the ferry terminal and look at the colourful boats and restaurants on the quayside. Oban is often called the 'Seafood Capital of Scotland' as a variety of species live in the nearby waters, especially shellfish. Catches and menus change daily.

Now notice the ferry terminal looming beyond. Today ferries literally overshadow Oban's fishing trade. Tourism is now the town's major source of income. This industry began in Victorian times when the Scottish islands became a fashionable region to tour. Oban was the ideal base to reach them so steamers stopped here on routes between Glasgow and Inverness.

Sea travel has grown here ever since. Around 8,500 people live in Oban but in the summer this figure can explode to 25,000 with beds, dinner tables and ferry tickets all becoming hard to find. Many people travel through the town to islands including Mull, Coll, Barra and Colonsay. The 'little bay' is now a large visitor port.

Directions

With the road on your right follow the coastal wall towards the town centre. Take time to enjoy the views across the bay. Follow the wall until it bends sharply left. When it does this, turn with your back to the water and look down Stafford Street, a cul-de-sac beyond the traffic islands with a large stone structure on the horizon.

02 Oban Distillery and McCaig's Tower

From here we can see two of Oban's major landmarks, the whisky distillery and McCaig's Tower. Oban Distillery is on the right of the street with a tall chimney while McCaig's Tower stands on the horizon. They both developed because of the town's natural access to water and stone.

The distillery was founded in 1794 and is credited with the town's first expansion from a fishing village. Whisky has been distilled in Scotland for centuries, largely thanks to the climate. Whisky's name comes from '*uisge beatha*' - the Gaelic for 'water of life' - and it was first made on monasteries as a way to use rain-soaked barley.

Distilling is a process that heats and cools liquidised grains, usually barley or malt, to extract alcohol from them. Most Scottish distilleries are on coasts, islands or rivers because water is a base ingredient in distilling while grinding the grains was done using water mills.

McCaig's Tower meanwhile was created because of another locally available resource - stone. It looks like a Roman amphitheatre but it was actually built in the late nineteenth century by local businessman John Stuart McCaig. Widely called McCaig's Folly, he planned it as a memorial to his family and a project to keep local stonemasons steadily employed during winter months.

The Distillery and the Tower are both popular visitor attractions. And both grew out of Oban's supplies of water and stone. So besides its location, Oban's natural environment also encouraged tourism to flourish. At the next couple of stops we will explore how these natural resources were created.

Directions

Turn back around so that the wall is on your left again. Follow it past a pair of red-roofed seafood restaurants and stop at the square pier beyond. There may be large ships berthed here. Find a good view towards the island on the horizon.

03 View of Kerrera from North Pier

We are now on the North Pier. Take a moment to see how many types of boat you can spot from here. Visiting cruise liners dock at this pier as part of their tours round the Hebrides. Smaller boats offer sea fishing and wildlife spotting trips for tourists. Others take people to the island you can see on the horizon - Kerrera.

Kerrera is one of 79 islands that make up the Inner Hebrides and it has an important effect on Oban. Kerrera protects Oban bay from extreme weather by bearing the brunt of Atlantic storms. This makes the water between Kerrera and Oban very calm, creating a safe harbour.

These conditions are also ideal for wildlife. If the tide is in, look for sunbathing jellyfish near the pier wall. If the tide is turning, look for various seabirds including oystercatchers, black guillemots and little ringed plovers.

Looking across to Kerrera, you may be able to see another island beyond. This is Mull, the fourth-largest island off mainland Britain. Can you name the three largest?*

Incredibly the islands that create Oban's calm waters have a fiery and dramatic origin. Mull, Kerrera and many other Hebrides islands were formed by ancient volcanos in the North Atlantic. Much of the land we can see from here was spewed into the ocean 400 to 50 million years ago by huge volcanic eruptions.

This activity shaped Oban's coastline. Parts of the bay formed when pieces of lava cooled and fused together. If the tide is out, look for a wide variety of rocks on the beach in many complex shapes - from jagged black heaps to flat grey squares.

But besides volcanic heat Oban's landscape was also shaped by something much colder. We will see clues at the next stop.

* The three largest islands off the British mainland are Lewis and Harris, Skye and Shetland

Directions

Turn right and make your way around the red-roofed buildings. Carefully continue through a car park then turn left to re-join the coastal wall. Follow the wall until you reach a large roundabout with a grassy area on the right and two large churches ahead.

04 View of the South Pier from the A85 roundabout

A roundabout might seem a strange place to linger but this spot offers us a view into Oban's past. Facing Kerrera, turn left towards the South Pier. Notice the ferry terminal is dwarfed by steep wooded hills to the right.

Now slowly turn left until you are facing the roundabout. You should see a bank of tree-lined hills behind the houses. Also notice the road from the roundabout climbs upwards.

The town of Oban sits on a step, at the foot of steep cliffs but above the sea level. The step is a feature known as a 'raised beach'. It was cut into the rock by the sea, when sea levels were much higher.

After volcanoes shaped islands like Kerrera and Oban's coast, the Earth went through an Ice Age. Starting 2.5 million years ago the planet's temperature dropped and vast areas were covered in huge sheets of ice. In Britain they spanned from Scotland to the northern edges of London. In places the ice was nearly a mile thick! The ice was very heavy so it pressed the land downwards until areas were partly submerged underwater.

From around 12,000 years ago the Earth slowly warmed up again. As the ice melted it formed swollen rivers that re-shaped the land. The most dramatic change though was that pressure and weight of the ice reduced. As a result whole sections of land emerged from underwater, in a process called 'isostatic readjustment'.

Imagine a glass of water with an ice cube in it. If you press the ice cube with your finger, it will sink downwards. As soon as you take your finger away, the ice will spring back to the surface. That's what happened to the land here.

The raised beach Oban sits upon and the large cliffs behind the town both emerged in this way. The shape of the land we can see from here is the remains of the former shore line, now some distance from the sea and no longer battered by waves.

Directions

Continue along the coast path past the two churches. Keep going up to a stone memorial enclosed by a small wall. There is a large egg-shaped rock to the right of it. Pause here a moment.

05 Oban War Memorial, Corran Esplanade

Take a moment to stop at this memorial, which commemorates local men who died in the First World War. Notice the outline of the three statues on the top. They deliberately mirror the shape of the large rock beside the road. But what is this large rock, about 4 metres high, doing on this spot?

The answer comes back to the melting ice. This rock was carried downhill by melting water during the end of the Ice Age. Rocks like this are called 'glacial erratics' because ice and water carried them from their place of origin to somewhere completely different. Some rocks travelled hundreds of miles in this way.

Glacial erratics are full of clues to an area's past; they can show how much ice and water there was and what direction it must have flowed in. This one also provides insight into the first people to settle in Oban. Look very carefully and you might be able to see curves cut into the stone. These are 'cup marks'.

They were engraved by people with sharp tools. Marks like these have been found throughout western Scotland but also in north Wales, Yorkshire and Northumberland. Their origins are unknown; different theories suggest they are decorative artworks, early maps or tool sharpeners. The ones on this stone have been dated to the Mesolithic Period some 5,000 years ago. Tools and bones from this era have been found in caves along Oban's coast.

Directions

Pass the memorial and continue onto the strip of grass beyond it. At the lamppost the path joins the road. Carefully cross the road and go through a set of metal gates by a white house. Follow the straight path gradually uphill, with the sea on your left and trees on your right. Stop when you reach a tall rock standing to the left of the path.

06 The Dog Stone, Corran Esplanade

This large rock is called the Dog Stone. Its strange name comes from a legend. Stories describe how a giant called Ossian used to go hunting in the Hebrides. This rock was where Ossian tied his dog, Bran. While Ossian was away Bran would strain at his leash, creating the groove we can see near the base.

The actual story of the Dog Stone is arguably as spectacular. This rock is a coastal feature known as a sea stack. Sea stacks are created by the power of the sea's waves. Waves wash at the bottom of cliffs and slowly break down the rock in a process called erosion. This is why the bottom of the Dog Stone is grooved.

Enough erosion will eventually create a hole in the base of the rock, which may wear away further to create a cave. Where the coastline is rugged and a cave forms on a headland, the waves will keep eroding it until a hole opens right through the cliff, creating an arch-like doorway in the sea. These arches often collapse over time, leaving the offshore column of rock behind as a sea stack.

This is how the Dog Stone formed. But look where it is. Why is a sea stack inland about 20 feet above the sea?

The answer is due to ice again. The land we are on now was once the edge of the coastline. After the ice melted, this part of the land gradually rose up carrying the Dog Stone with it.

This remarkable rock is our final stop. Although many people pass through Oban on their way to other places, it is worth remembering how and why. This town became a travel route thanks to a spectacular chain of natural events. By following the footsteps of mythical giants we have explored a coastline shaped by volcanoes and an Ice Age. We discovered how the results allowed Oban to develop, from access to stone and water to protection by offshore islands. These dramatic ancient factors helped create today's scenic town. Long before tourism took off, Oban had already been on a journey of its own.

Directions

To return to the South Pier you can retrace your way along the coastal path. Alternatively you may want to continue past the Dog Stone to visit Dunollie Castle and museum. To do this, continue along the path. When you reach the end of the field take the path curving left towards a small road. The entrance to Dunollie will be on the other side of this road.

 Trail complete – we hope you have enjoyed it!