

Title: Menai Straits

Sub:

A great opportunity to explore one of the most stunning and challenging dinghy cruising areas around. This narrow strait needs to be treated with respect. Indeed, no less than Lord Nelson stated that if you could sail around Anglesey, you could sail around the world! Nevertheless, the rewards for those who accept the challenge are great, with a selection of beautiful ports to visit all with the wild and beautiful mountains of Snowdonia as a backdrop.

1: Start at Beaumaris as a Westward passage through the Menai Strait is considered somewhat easier. There are two slipways in Beaumaris; the most central is the lifeboat slipway (53°15'44.4"N 4°05'24.6"W) which you are allowed to use but, of course, be aware that the lifeboat naturally will have priority! There is ample parking on The Green nearby. Another option is the skipway at Gallows Point (53°15'20.2"N 4°06'09.6"W) to the south. This is run by ABC Marine who are happy for you to launch and retrieve for a small fee (abcpm.co.uk).

2: You need to be at the Swellies at slack tide – High Water and an hour afterwards essentially. This is the narrowest section of the Menai Straits and the tide can run through here at up to eight knots and be more suitable for white water rafting at some states of tide. Beaumaris is about four miles from the Swellies so give yourself a generous two hours to get there without stress

3: The simplest indication you are nearing The Swellies are the two bridges; first up is Menai Bridge itself (53°13'12.0"N 4°09'43.7"W); a handsome suspension bridge which ushers you into the narrowest section of the strait. Keep an eye out for strong eddies.

4: Once under Menai Bridge, stick close to the Welsh side of the strait as North Swelly Platters, Cribbin and Britannia Rocks are menaces - although you have less to worry about in a dinghy.

5: Pass through Britannia Railway Bridge (53°12'56.7"N 4°11'05.4"W) and, all being well, you should now be able to carry a fair tide down to Caernarfon. Bear in mind that, occasionally, large merchant ships use the Menai Straits and it is absolutely vital that you stay well clear of them. They most definitely have right of way!

6: Caernarfon has a slip to retrieve your boat at Victoria Dock in the middle of town (53°08'40.3"N 4°16'38.1"W). This is accessible three hours either side of HW, so there is time if you are at the Swellies on HW. caernarfonharbour.org.uk

Northern limit: (53°15'44.4"N 4°05'24.6"W)

Southern limit: (53°08'40.3"N 4°16'38.1"W).

Eastern Limit: (53°15'44.4"N 4°05'24.6"W)

Western Limit: (53°08'40.3"N 4°16'38.1"W).

Distance: 13 miles

Time: 4-6 hours

OS Map: OS263

Trail start/finish: Start- Beaumaris (53°15'44.4"N 4°05'24.6"W), Finish – Caernarfon (53°08'40.3"N 4°16'38.1"W).

About the area

The Menai Straits is the narrow stretch of water that separates mainland Wales from the Isle of Anglesey. This 16 mile long strip of highly tidal water is as narrow as 500m in parts and indeed it's very name alludes to this, for Menai comes from the Welsh main-aw meaning narrow. There are two bridges that connect the Anglesey to the mainland and they both complement the dramatic nature of the strait which at points feels little more than a gorge – albeit one that reasonably large ships can pass through.

Speaking of drama, the straits are famed for the savage tides that rip through at alarming rates. This is most obvious between the two bridges in an area called The Swellies, a shallow, rocky patch that, at certain states of the tide, resembles a stretch of rapids with alarming overfalls and small whirlpools. This section is so shallow that it is - at least theoretically – possible to walk across the strait at the very bottom of a big spring tide. This is, however extremely dangerous due to the extremely strong currents associated with a big tide.

The area around the Menai Straits is also stunning; the Snowdonia mountain range provides a dramatic backdrop, while the strait is bookended by the ports of Caernarfon toward the southern end on the mainland Wales side of the strait and Beaumaris on the western end, lying on the Isle of Anglesey. Both feature beautiful castles and are popular tourist destinations. The ancient university town of Bangor also lies at the northern end of the strait and although it perhaps lacks some of the picture postcard charm of Beaumaris and Caernarfon, it is still well worth a visit and lays claim to being the oldest seat of learning in the UK.

Interesting fact

Just adjacent to the Britannia Railway Bridge on the Anglesey side of the strait lies the village of Llanfairpwllgwyngyllgogerychwyrndrobwllllantysiliogogogoch. This village has gained much fame to its rather absurd tongue twisting name which roughly translates as: The] church of [St.] Mary (Llanfair) [of the] pool (pwll) of the white hazels (gwyn gyll) near "over against"] (go ger) the fierce whirlpool (y chwyrn drobwll) [and] the church of [St.] Tysilio (Llantysilio) of the red cave (-ogo[f] goch)". In fact, the name was a publicity stunt. The village was actually called Llanfairpwllgwyngyll, but the name was changed in 1869 when the railway was being built so that it possessed the longest railway station name in the UK and drew in a few more tourists.

Feel like a challenge?

With the mighty Snowdonia range of hills just a few miles distant so if you're visiting the area then it really is well worth heading for the hills for a spot of hiking. Why not see if you can conquer Snowdon itself? At 1,085m it's the second highest peak in the UK behind Ben Nevis. There's even a café on top to reward weary hikers.

Want to extend your trip?

Anglesey is about much more than just the Menai Strait and the eastern side, exposed to the wild Irish Sea is a stunning and rugged place to visit with many fine coastal walks to enjoy interlaced with some charming villages.