

The Islay – Jura Overland Route

At a time when the construction of a new vessel for Islay is to be considered, it is opportune to consider an alternative that can provide more capacity and greater frequency in a more cost effective and environmentally friendly manner – namely – the Islay-Jura “overland” option. This option features two short and frequent ferry crossings firstly across the Sound of Jura between Keills (Knapdale) and Lagg (Jura) and secondly, as currently in operation across the Sound of Islay between Feolin (Jura) and Port Askaig (Islay).

BACKGROUND

The “overland” option was recommended in 1967 by the Highland Transport Board who strongly favoured it on the grounds that, at up to ten round trips per day, it would give the much higher frequency of service, which, to quote, “has proved so important in attracting traffic”, as compared with up to three round trips per day on the then relatively long Tarbert route. As described at the time, much greater capacity of 200 cars per day would be provided in each direction by a 20 car ferry ($20 \times 10 = 200$) as compared with 120 cars per day in each direction by a 40 car capacity ferry via Tarbert ($40 \times 3 = 120$). The cost of building and operating the Overland style vessels and terminals were calculated to be less than for the Tarbert route. The downside was the cost of upgrading the 17.37 miles (A 846) and 10.97 miles (B 8025) of substandard roads on Jura and Knapdale respectively. The Board recommended that “the cost of the necessary road works should be regarded as part of a comprehensive plan to improve sea and road transport approaches to Islay”. In the event the scheme was not proceeded with and a relatively infrequent service has been provided ever since between West Loch Tarbert (later Kennacraig) and Islay. The capital cost and running costs of two large ferries for the service together with their terminals is now of a high magnitude.

AN OPPORTUNITY

It is true that the cost of upgrading the Jura and Knapdale road links to modern standard would, be considerable – say £50 million. On the other hand the cost of a new 80 car consort ferry for MV *Finlaggan* is also estimated be of the order of £30 to £35 million, bearing in mind the need to accommodate some 24 crew, as the vessel berths at a different port each night. The annual operating cost of the vessel is likely to be in the region of £10 million.

What is suggested here is a hybrid solution to serving Islay and Jura, by splitting most of the car and light commercial traffic from heavy commercial vehicle flows by routing the former via the overland route while the latter would continue to use the existing Kennacraig route, albeit at a reduce one vessel frequency, thereby removing the necessity for ordering a new large vessel.

As the overland route would be restricted to light vehicles only, it would not be necessary in the medium term to rebuild the single track roads on Jura and Knapdale to full double track standard. Relatively minor upgrades the extent of extra passing places, some surface dressing would suffice together with the complete rebuilding and double tracking of the one mile approach road between the A 846 and Lagg Rubha a' Chamaais Ferry Pier. The terminals at Lagg and Keills would also have to be modified and marshalling areas created. The cost of these improvements may be estimated at £15 million.

To provide the link across the Sound of Jura, a new 40 car shuttle ferry would be required at a capital cost of say £7 million (c.f. Western Ferries vessels at £4 million). The annual operating cost of such a vessel would be of the order of £3 million. The existing Sound of Islay ferry (two crew) would probably have to be replaced, in summer at least, by an existing vessel of greater capacity at an additional annual cost of say £1 million.

ROUTE CHARACTERISTICS

Costs

The cost estimates set out above, need to be refined and tested, but they suggest that the capital cost of the hybrid overland plus long route option should be no more than that of ordering a new large vessel. Annual operating costs would be less than half those of the proposed new vessel.

Capacity

The route capacity assuming ten return crossings daily with a 40 car capacity vessel across the Sound of Jura would be 800 cars per day compared with a maximum of 480 for a large 80 car vessel making three return crossings daily. Assuming all current car traffic were routed *via* the overland route, the average number of cars per crossing averages eight, well within the capacity of the existing road, especially as northbound and southbound flows would be alternate, such that vehicles awaiting departure by ferry would have reached the terminal before arriving vehicles set off.

Journey Times

As demonstrated at Appendix 1, overall journey times between all places in Islay, Jura and the Scottish mainland are faster in every case by the overland route as compared with Kennacraig, as illustrated in the table below.

Journey	Via Kennacraig (mins)	Via the Overland (mins)
Port Ellen – Lochgilphead	187	160
Bowmore – Lochgilphead	203	150
Bridgend – Lochgilphead	201	146
Craighouse – Lochgilphead	205	95

The overall timings take into account wait time at terminals as published on the one hand by CalMac and on the other hand as practiced on the Shetland overland system to which extra time has been added so as to err on the conservative side.

Environmental Effect

As regards CO₂ emissions, *Finlaggan*'s power output of 8,000 kW (greater than Islay and Jura's entire electricity consumption) contrasts with a 40 car shuttle ferry at 1,000 kW. By summing the CO₂ emissions per car mile on the alternative road sections and the CO₂ emissions per car carried per mile on the ferry crossings, it is possible to compare the CO₂ emissions per car journey between Port Ellen and Lochgilphead on the overland route compared with the Kennacraig route as set out in Appendix 1. It will be noted that the figure for the overland route is 20.44kg CO₂ per car compared with over seven times that at 152.12kg for the Kennacraig route.

THE LONGER TERM

The hybrid arrangement described above should be seen as a temporary measure whereby only light traffic is routed overland, while heavy commercial traffic and some car traffic would continue to be routed via Kennacraig. Inevitably the attractiveness of the overland route would result in most existing and newly generated car and light commercial traffic opting to use it. In the longer term, therefore, it will become expedient to improve the road to full double track modern standard such that all vehicles could use it, further shortening journey times and thereby rendering the Kennacraig route obsolete. The improved access to Islay and Jura, together with reduced operating and environmental costs would be immense.

SUMMARY

Having taken all this on board, the overland route, whether in its hybrid or fully developed form, offers very significant potential for increased capacity, shorter overall journey times to and from any part of Islay and Jura, cheaper fares, reduced environmental damage and more useful journey opportunities and traffic growth by dint of greater frequency. A more detailed assessment is recommended.

Roy Pedersen
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