



Port of plenty (clockwise from top): comings and goings in Oban Bay; Gylen Castle, Kerrera; dolphin spotting; paddling on the River Etive

3 Oban, Argyll
 Population: **approx 8,500**
 Average house price: **£158,553**

LIVING:

Oban is often overlooked as an outdoor town, but it's hard to understand why given its gorgeous coastal location. Attractively laid out, with views over the nearby island of Kerrera to Mull and beyond, the town spills down from the hills into busy Oban Bay, its mix of grand houses overlooked by the town's famous landmark, the Colosseum-like McCaig's Tower.

Not surprisingly, this is a town that lives for the sea. Known as the 'Seafood Capital of Scotland', Oban retains a significant fishing fleet, the produce from which finds its way onto the tables of the many top-quality restaurants in the area. Some such as The Waterfront have expanded greatly in recent years, while newcomers such as Cuan Mor (which also has its own brewery) and The Waypoint Grill on Kerrera have only added to the area's gastronomic reputation.

Oban is also a sailing hot-spot, with yachties enjoying some of the best cruising grounds in Europe. However it is the town's position as gateway to the isles and main west coast hub for CalMac ferries that ensures a year-round

hustle and bustle. The sheer number of visitors, including shoppers from the isles, ensures that Oban boasts a fantastic mix of eateries, cafes, bars and shopping facilities for such a relatively small town.

And let's not forget, Oban is also a university town now that both Argyll College and the Scottish Association of Marine Sciences (SAMS) – itself one of the world's leading marine science institutes – have become academic partners of the newly created University of the Highlands and Islands. A prime mover behind Oban's Festival of the Sea, SAMS is an important employer in the area, although more jobs will be created on completion of a new European Marine Science Park to the north of Oban on the Dunstaffnage Peninsula.

Given its location, reasonable connections with the rest of Scotland (a scenic two-and-a-half hour drive from the Central Belt), good educational and medical facilities (including a hospital), it's no surprise that Oban remains a very desirable place in which to live. The housing market is as stable as anywhere in Scotland, particularly at the higher end of the market. A smart new development at Ganavan Sands has all but sold out, while there are a host of smaller, outlying settlements to choose from for those who seek

their own corner of coastal heaven.

PLAYING:

Oban has perhaps been slower than others to embrace outdoor tourism, but the area is hardly lacking when it comes to options – particularly for those who love the water. In addition to sailing, the surrounding coastline offers some of the best sea kayaking in Scotland – with the chance to encounter the area's outstanding marine life – while there is top river paddling on the Orchy and Awe (also a venue for white water racing), plus open canoeing on Lochs Etive and Awe. The diving is also excellent. On land, there is great hill walking, usually with extensive sea views thrown in for your efforts, while the area is also becoming increasingly popular with cyclists, with long stretches of the Sustans route from Oban to Fort William now complete. Oh, and did we mention the islands? Hop on a ferry and the outdoor playground gets a whole lot bigger still.

DON'T MISS

Tucking into locally-caught seafood; exploring the nearby Slate Islands and Corryvreckan whirlpool; island hopping. www.oban.org.uk