



**Classic UK Paddling Destination**  
IN ASSOCIATION WITH JERSEY KAYAK ADVENTURES

Tide-races in Alderney with Jersey Kayak adventures

# Alderney

## The Rock in the River

DEREK HAIRON

Alderney is rarely visited by sea kayakers: a quick glance at a chart quickly flags this up as a paddle which is in a different league. This is a big offshore trip where you will find yourself paddling in 7 knot plus tide streams, overfalls, eddies and ocean swell. The famous race of Alderney is well known by sailors, but it's the Swinge where the action really takes place: here the water really flows downhill. Think of Alderney as a rock in a river where the flow changes direction, then everything will start to make more sense. Quite rightly, the island is considered a tricky sailing destination where many of the stories of big seas and fast currents are not exaggerated.

**In a river, the flow is influenced by the amount of water moving downstream. The same may be true around Alderney, except that it seems to be approaching weather systems and the lunar cycle which influences the surges of water around the island.**

### Paddling to Alderney

Getting to Alderney with a kayak can be tricky. If conditions are good kayaking across is perhaps the best option, although this is not the place to be attempting your first offshore voyage. You get a little help from the tide on departing from Guernsey. This lets you leave a little earlier (perhaps -0240 HW St Helier) and gives a little extra time if you are running late as you approach Alderney. Paddlers from Jersey tend to go via Sark as the difference in time and distance is not much. Their choice of avoiding Guernsey has nothing to do with the traditional rivalry between the two islands (particularly intense during inter-island football matches when a punch-up used to be part of the event). Ideally you want to arrive in the Swinge on the last of the northeast stream (+0200 St Helier).

Things speed up once clear of Guernsey. The first time we paddled to Alderney in the 1980s, Steve remarked after 1 hour 30 min paddling that there was still time to turn back. Franco Ferrero was already on edge and snapped back: "No, we've passed the point of return. You're going to Alderney whatever you think!" At that point Steve fell silent and just stared at the Alderney cliffs on the horizon.

Approaching the Swinge the tide streams are fast and complex. Just think of the Swinge as a wide river requiring river techniques and you should be fine. If you are late, expect to handrail the coast or try a close inshore route on the south coast to grab any eddies. The first possible take-out in the Swinge is by Fort Clonque; 1 km beyond is a storm beach at Saline Bay. This might be an option if things look nasty along the breakwater, but I'd rather take out at Fort Clonque. If waves are crashing over the breakwater, things are going to be pretty wild and you have to choose between the inshore or offshore tide races in the Swinge while aiming to make the break-out into Braye Bay.

If you can get close enough at the breakwater, look out for the date stones high on the wall which mark each year of construction. Built between 1847 and 1864, the breakwater was planned as a base for the British Navy. Two-thirds of the breakwater's structure lies beneath the sea and requires constant repair. Even after the end of the breakwater was allowed to collapse due to the ferocious winter storms, it remains the longest in the United Kingdom.

Braye Harbour has a small supermarket, restaurants, hotel and an essential bar in which to celebrate or calm your nerves. The island campsite is behind the dunes at Saye Bay where there is a sandy beach. Bibette Head and the nearby reefs can produce some fast water, so it may be best to paddle to the campsite first before heading off to celebrate. On a couple of trips the desire to grab a bite to eat and a beer has taken precedence, resulting in a bivvi on Braye Beach. My first trip led to a couple of nights stay in an old German bunker near Braye with public toilets and a shower nearby. On another trip we selected a dune bivvi spot. This was ideal and allowed us to head off early next morning to circumnavigate the island, leaving Ian to have a lie in. On return we found our camp spot washed out - we'd camped in a small channel of a well-blocked stream outlet which unblocked itself about half an hour after we'd left. Had we left any later, we'd have been woken by a very smelly deluge of stream water. On subsequent trips to Alderney, we've opted for one of the many good small hotels.

### History

Alderney is not a new kayaking destination. In 1830 the Jersey Loyalist newspaper wrote about Mr Canham from London who had canoed from Cherbourg to Alderney and planned to continue his voyage to Jersey. I've not found any information to suggest he reached Jersey.

Anyone who is fascinated by military fortifications will be amazed at just how well defended the island was throughout history. Alderney has been called the 'Key to the Channel'. Numerous British fortifications were built during the 19th century, but whether they were of any use is debatable. Gladstone wrote the defences were "a monument of human folly, useless to us ... but perhaps not absolutely useless to a possible enemy ...". A consequence of this building frenzy is that the island has something of an English feel.

As the Nazis approached in 1940 the entire population except for seven were hastily evacuated to England. Domestic pets were shot and large-value items buried or hidden. This is reported to have led to something like a giant treasure hunt taking place after the war. The Nazis set about making Alderney an impregnable fortress riddled with bunkers and gun emplacements built by the Organisation Todt (German non-combatant civilian construction organisation) and forced labour. Four concentration camps were constructed where arbitrary beatings were a daily occurrence and rations were barely enough to support life. The local campsite is located near the site of one camp. Although a war crimes case was prepared against the former commandant of the Norderney and Sylt concentration camps, he never stood trial.

Today the island has a population of 2400 and a surprisingly wide range of cafes, restaurants and bars. There is a vibrant and lively nightlife, especially in the summer. Look out for 'bunker parties' (informal dance music events in abandoned bunkers) and more organised events during Alderney Week at the Corporation Quarry ('quarry parties'). Friends who paddled up for the solar eclipse speak in awe about what they can remember from the bunker party they attended. ▶

### An impregnable fortress

During the Nazi occupation the Channel Islands were more heavily fortified than any other coastal region, far outweighing the strategic importance of the islands to the Nazis. Around 10% of the entire Atlantic wall defences were constructed in the Channel Islands. By 1944, an incredible 244,000 cubic metres had been excavated compared to 255,000 cubic metres for the entire Atlantic wall in Europe. The Führer greatly prized the islands partly because he had captured the oldest possessions of the British Crown and, by occupying British territory, Hitler thought he had begun the break-up of the British Empire. Hitler ordered that all plans for the islands must be sent to him for approval and both Hitler and his officials paid more attention to the islands' defence than was necessary. By 1943, 42,800 Germans were based in the Channel Islands (equivalent to two-thirds of the civilian population).

## Around the island

Both a clockwise or anticlockwise route around Alderney is feasible, but the clockwise route is perhaps more awkward. If your timings are out or the streams are in a funny mood that day you may hit the west-running steam in the Swinge.

Leaving Braye Bay, the numerous British and Nazi gun batteries below Fort Albert reveal the defences constructed on Alderney. There is rarely a moment when you will not see a British or Nazi gun emplacement on this trip. The area from Saline Bay to Les Etacs rocks is a Ramsar reserve. At low tide on the shoreward side of Corbet Rock, what at first looks like sand is Maërl (a form of coralline red algae resembling coral). It is worth landing to explore at low tide but you may sink up to your knees in the coarse sand and Maërl, which can feel a bit scary. In some countries Maërl is gathered as a fertiliser, but it is regarded as a non-renewable resource. Nearby is Fort Clonque, now a Landmark Trust holiday let. The causeway covers so it is possible to nip between Fort Clonque and the shore if the Swinge is off-putting that day. This spot is the last decent take-out or put-in point before you hit the south coast cliffs.

If conditions are suitable, head to the gannet nests at Les Etacs. The rocks are easy to spot as they appear to be painted white; as you get closer you can however smell the 'paint'. Gannets first nested in 1940 and it is suspected their arrival coincided with the decline of gannets on Lundy when the island was used as a military base. The imposing gannetry on Ortac demands a tricky crossing of the Swinge. The Ortac and Les Etacs colonies have about 7500 gannets. Recent research with radio tracking found that the gannets travel over 340 km to feed. If you want to observe the birds, the warden recommends you watch silently from your kayak for at least 20 minutes so they get used to you and may come quite close.

At Le Puit de Jervais the SS Point Law was wrecked in 1975. This is just one of about 180 shipwrecks around Alderney. Nearby is Telegraph Bay where landing is possible at half tides, but the footpath up is in very bad condition and a take-out is only recommended for those who enjoy extreme portages. Nearby are La Nache and Fourquie Stacks which are great to paddle between. The offshore rocks Coupe, Joyeux and the Noires Putes can be tricky spots to visit, as the tide stream is not the same as inshore. We once got caught out thinking the flow was running west at Joyeux Rocks when it was flowing strongly to the south. This resulted in some unplanned 'resistance paddling' back inshore.

From Coque Lihou to L'Etac de la Quoire you may encounter strong eddies extending up to Queslingue Rocks. The eddy seems to vary depending on the incoming weather systems and tide heights. The disused Cachaliere Quarry and pier seem out of place. On a grey overcast early morning paddle, this spot appears Tolkien-like with the L'Etac rocks looking like something out of a Norse saga; the effect is quite eerie.

Blue Stone beach lives up to its name: it is a storm beach full of large well-rounded rocks with a faint path down to the beach. There are caves and sea arches around La Tchue Bay so it is worth taking time to explore these, but watch out if there is any swell about.

Longis Bay is a sandy beach with easy access and shelter from the westerlies. Recent archaeological excavations suggest that the ancient Chateau de Longis may be a Roman Fort. This is a good put-in or take-out point for shorter paddles along parts of the south coast to L'Etac de la Quoire and around the northeast coast. The large round clay ball on the Nazi wall is one of 11 Goldsworthy Stones ([www.alderneystones.com](http://www.alderneystones.com)) located around the island. Over time, the stones are decaying back into the earth as part of the art project.

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Brinchetais Rocks are tricky if there is a southerly stream, but once around them you can tuck in close to the coast. The ruined Fort les Homeaux Florains is reminiscent of a Venetian fort. Corblets and Saye Bay are sandy beaches, which can produce surf and provide options to get afloat on rough days. Rounding Bibette Head takes you back into Braye Bay.

### Offshore trips and variations

Burhou is a challenging option even if the weather is very good and you are confident you have got the timings right. The island is a puffin breeding site and landing is restricted during the breeding season. The Alderney Wildlife Trust is a useful source of information and Roland, the manager/warden, has kayaking experience around Alderney. The trust operates a puffin-cam ([www.alderneywildlife.org](http://www.alderneywildlife.org)) so you can watch puffin nesting online.

The Casquets (7 NM, 13 km) are an elusive destination. The name originates from the French 'cascade' and alludes to the huge tidal streams pouring around the rocks. The numerous symbols for eddies (drawn as whirlpools) on the tidal stream atlas and chart around the Casquets are rather worrying. In reality, the streams barely pause for a minute before changing direction and it is rare for the water to be calm at the Casquets. Victor Hugo, who lived in both Jersey and Guernsey, wrote "*To be wrecked on the Casquets is to be cut into ribbons ...*" The Casquets were the site of the worst shipping disaster in the Channel Islands on 30th March 1899 when the SS Stella, travelling at 18 knots in thick fog, collided with the Casquets; 77 of the 190 crew perished.

During the Second World War the lighthouse was used as an observation post and garrisoned by seven Nazi soldiers. In September 1942 a party of ten officers and two men landed by dinghy to capture the guards. The top-heavy officer contingent suggests the raid was used as a training exercise. Unbeknown to the British Commandos, the raid was perfectly timed. Five minutes before the attack, the routine radio check had been completed and it was many hours before the raid was discovered.

### Alternative departure points and destinations

**Jersey direct:** The southbound stream from Alderney to Jersey runs for almost 7 hours; it is feasible to paddle the 35 NM in around 6–7 hours on a neap tide in good conditions. As you cross the Banc de la Schole (7 NM south of Alderney) it is remarkable just how shallow the

water gets. The alternative is to break the trip to Jersey by stopping on Sark. It is worth considering this option, as it is fairly easy to switch routes until you are about 12 NM south of Alderney.

**From France:** The French departure point at Baie d'Écalgrain (small car park) is on the limits of the 6 mile rule for sea kayaking in French waters. Check the CKMer website ([www.ckmer.org](http://www.ckmer.org)) or Colin Appleby's excellent kayaking in Brittany website ([ocean-kayaking.net](http://ocean-kayaking.net)) for an English explanation of the current regulations for sea kayaking in France.

### Alderney Tides

Prepare yourself for a headache, as the tidal streams around Alderney are very complex. Though Alderney is small it gets a separate entry in the tidal stream atlas due to the complexity of the currents. This booklet is essential reading (unless you like unplanned offshore kayaking trips).

You'd be forgiven for thinking the tide around Alderney wakes up each morning and decides which side of the bed to roll out on. A more probable explanation is to think of Alderney as a rock in a river. Watch water flowing around a rock and the volume constantly varies along with eddies and currents. In a river, the flow is influenced by the amount of water moving downstream. The same may be true around Alderney, except that it seems to be approaching weather systems and the lunar cycle which influences the surges of water around the island.

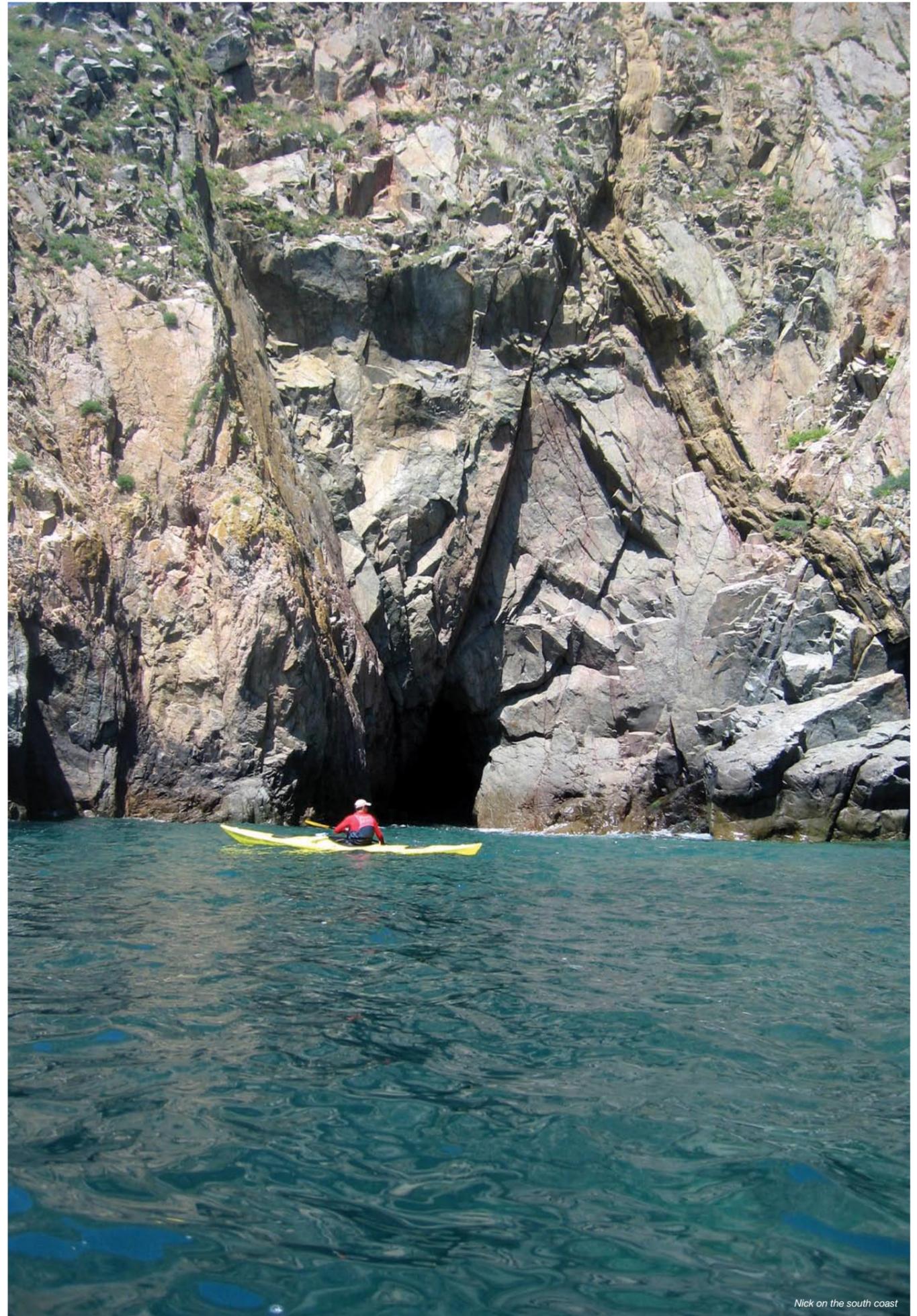
The eddy on the south coast is puzzling. On two occasions I've paddled the same section of coast on a spring tide, at the same time of tide, only to find the tide streams were running completely different to the previous day.

If you enjoy fast-flowing water, the ledges between L'Etac de la Quoire and the coast produce an excellent standing wave with lots of opportunity to practice ferry glides. Brinchetais Ledge is a great place to practise advanced sea kayak river techniques. From about LW St Helier, the southwest stream flows downhill between the ledges. There is a big eddy pool near Fort Ile de Raz to pick up the pieces, from which it is a short drift back to Longis Bay.

In the Swinge near Corbet Rock (at LW St Helier) the stream runs at it's fastest. Look out for overfalls, eddies and boils as the tide thunders by. ►

## About the author

Derek Hairon is a BCU level 5 sea coach and Director of Jersey Kayak Adventures ([www.jerseykayakadventures.co.uk](http://www.jerseykayakadventures.co.uk)), the only specialist sea kayaking company in the Channel Islands. He organises both coastal and offshore tours and charter-boat-supported kayak tours to the offshore islands and reefs. Born in Jersey, Derek has spent most of his life kayaking in the Channel Islands as well as sea kayak expeditions (e.g. Ireland circumnavigation, Faroe Islands, Aland Islands, Alaska, the Tamur and Marsyangdi rivers in Nepal and many UK sea kayak destinations). He is the author of *Sit-on-top Kayak: A Beginner's Guide* published by Pesda Press.



Nick on the south coast



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### Tidal data

Tidal stream atlas NP264; tidal port St Helier; tide range 6.9 m at springs.

HW St Helier: -0455 HW Dover.

HW Alderney: +0045 St Helier.

(All times below are relative to HW St Helier)

At the Swinge off Sauquet Rock (NE of Les Homeaux Florains) a west-going stream begins at -0005 HW and quickly extends along the breakwater at about 4 knots during springs tides. Further out, an east-going stream runs at about 4 knots. Around +0045 HW the east-going stream ceases and a west-going stream is established along the north coast from Sauquet Rock to about 1 NM north of the breakwater and down to Corbet Rock. At +0300 HW the remaining northeast-going stream in the Swinge slackens. The westerly eddy extends across the Swinge. By +0430 HW, the southwest-going stream is running. By -0215 HW, the east-going stream is flowing (although the atlas lists this as flowing at -0240 HW).

In the Alderney Race, the north-going stream starts at -0140 HW. Around +0450 HW, a southwest-going stream is established (maximum 7 knots). This swings more southerly and then southeast until -0240 HW.

On the south coast, in theory the east-going stream runs for about 9 hours (spring tides) and 8 hours (neap tides). Off the Noires Putes, this starts about -0430 HW St Helier. The west-going stream starts about +0255 HW. However, close inshore an easterly eddy operates from about +0450 HW until -0440 HW when the main easterly stream is established. This seems to be generated by the channel between Alderney and the South Banks.

### Weather

Any trip to Alderney by kayak requires good weather. Although friends have made the crossing in a northwesterly F4+, the conditions were challenging. One paddler recently spent five days stuck on Alderney. Allow for bad weather and include the option of freighting your kayaks to or from Alderney and flying across. Bear in mind that boats and planes can be delayed due to bad weather, even in summer.

### Maps and charts

Alderney land map: Sheet Bailiwick of Guernsey 1:15000/1:10000 States of Guernsey Official Map

Braye Harbour UTM Grid ref 750 082

Around the island: 16 km (8.5 NM); Jersey-Sark 12 NM; Sark-Alderney 19 NM; Alderney-Jersey 30 NM

Admiralty chart 2669 Channel Islands and adjacent coast of France, Alderney chart 60

### Additional information

Alderney Coastguard: 01481 822620, channel 16, 74

Guernsey Coastguard: 01481 720085, channel 16, 20

Jersey Coastguard: (01534 447705 transit reports channel 82), channel 16, 82

In French waters: CROSS Jobourg Channel 70

Alderney Tourist Board ([www.visitalderney.com](http://www.visitalderney.com)) is an excellent source of information, and they publish a useful Sailing to Alderney booklet.

There are shower facilities for visiting yachtsmen at Braye Harbour.

The Alderney Sailing Club has weather forecasts on display.

Mobile phone and mobile data coverage throughout the Channel Islands is excellent, but the networks are not the same as for the UK.

On the inter-island crossings check the Condor High Speed ferry times as you are likely to cross its route.

Camping is at Saye Bay  
tel: 01481 822556 [camping@alderney.net](mailto:camping@alderney.net)

A kayak trolley is useful in case you need to move to another spot around the coast.

### Getting to / from Alderney

If you decide the paddle to Alderney is too committing or you are short of time or stormbound, Aurigny Airlines operate scheduled flights to Guernsey, Southampton and Jersey via Guernsey. A flight in a Trilander aircraft is a great experience, although it may feel like sitting in a small car. You'll be guaranteed a window seat and a great view when landing. One of the runways on Alderney is grass so you get a bush-flying experience and can watch the rabbits darting for cover. If you end up sitting next to the pilot, don't touch any buttons.

Getting the kayaks to and from Alderney is a bit of a hassle and tends to take longer than you'd expect, so allow a day either side. Twice-weekly freight-only services are operated by:

Alderney Shipping Company to Guernsey, Jersey and Poole  
[www.alderneyshipping.com](http://www.alderneyshipping.com) tel: 01481 724810

Huelin Renouf to Jersey, Guernsey, Southampton  
[www.huelin-renouf.com](http://www.huelin-renouf.com) tel: 01534 825650

2012 freight prices to Jersey or Guernsey are around £45 each way. Short coastal sit-on-top kayak trips are sometimes organised by Alderney Wildlife Trust out of Longis and Braye Bay. ☺