

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 2, Episode 7: 'Whisky Galore' - On the Malt Whisky Trail

Published on 2 November 2021

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{pre-roll AD}

{SOUND: Podcast jingle}

Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland,

a podcast full of immersive travel stories from Scotland.

I'm your host, Kathi Kamleitner.

Wild for Scotland helps you connect with Scotland
and dream about future adventures,
regardless of your travel plans.

Each episode starts with a travel story to whisk you away.
Then, I'll tell you some of my top tips to visit Scotland for yourself.

So, lean back and enjoy -
Let's travel to Scotland!

"Slàinthe mhath" - if you pick up some Gaelic words before or during your trip to Scotland, let them be these two. It literally translates as wishing someone "good health", but as the avid whisky drinkers among you will know, it also means "cheers!"

When I went on my research trip for this week's story, I said "slàinthe mhath" a lot. Like every episode in this season, we're going on a road trip. But for once, we're actually leaving the car parked for a little bit longer. After all, there are some aspects of Scottish culture that don't mix well with driving.

After writing last season's story about acquiring a taste for whisky on Islay, I knew I wanted to explore a different whisky region this time around. We're heading to the Speyside, on the Malt Whisky Trail to be exact.

We'll visit the Whisky Capital of the World, learn about an often overlooked aspect of the whisky industry - and of course, we'll try some ourselves.

And the best thing is, today's so-called road trip, is actually possible to do without too much driving. You just need to drive there and back.

So, unless you're in a car right now, pour yourself a dram and get comfortable.

This is 'Whisky Galore'.

{SOUND - Jingle: tbc}

"I don't have a table, but you can sit and eat at the bar",

For a second I hesitate. Sitting on a bar stool could be difficult...

You see, I'm heading to the Speyside to explore the Malt Whisky Trail. And I'm booking this specific restaurant because it is within walking distance from my accommodation, but also near the end of the whisky tour I booked.

And not just *any* whisky tour. A tour round all 7 distilleries in Dufftown, 9 if you count the ones that have stopped producing new whisky. At each, we'll get tasters. That's a lot of whisky.

And that's why sitting on a barstool might be difficult.

But, I've heard that the food at this restaurant is worth the risk. Dinner at the bar, it is.

[SOUND: driving sounds]

The next day, I make my way north. From Glasgow, I drive up past Stirling and Perth. Dunkeld and Pitlochry. Dalwhinnie and Newtonmore. And then, just past Aviemore - I leave the big road behind, and head off to follow the water of life.

The Speyside is named after the River Spey. It carves its way over 100 miles from the Highlands to the Moray coast, which makes it the third-longest river in Scotland, only surpassed by the River Tay and the Clyde. It's source is Loch Spey, somewhere among the mountains between Laggan and Invergarry. Along the way, tributaries feed it with more and more water. And where there is water in Scotland, there is also whisky. The water of life.

Driving up the A95, a sign comes into view - the one I've been waiting for. Just past the impressive Tormore Distillery, it says: "Welcome to the Malt Whisky Trail."

The Speyside is by far the most productive whisky region in Scotland. Over half of all Scottish whisky is made here in over 50 distilleries. You'll also find the three largest

distilleries here in the Speyside - Glenlivet, Glenfiddich and Macallan. Less than 20 miles apart, they produce around 57 million litres of whisky per year.

These and other distilleries create jobs, sustain local farmers and attract countless visitors to the area. Whisky sets the tone in the Speyside, and I'm here to listen.

As a rather recently converted whisky connoisseur, I'm excited about what awaits me on the Malt Whisky Trail. Speyside whiskies are often considered easier to drink, especially if you're new to whisky. And although I've grown fond of a peaty Islay dram, I look forward to tasting what the region has to offer.

I booked a B&B in Dufftown, a small village in the heart of the region that likes to call itself the Whisky Capital of the World. From there, I have easy access to countless whisky distilleries and other sites that are worth seeing in Speyside.

My first stop is the Craigellachie Bridge. A cast iron bridge that reaches with one long and slender arch across the River Spey. Like so many other bridges in Scotland, it was designed by Thomas Telford and built in the early 19th century. I've heard rumours that the bridge was actually constructed for a different location, which would explain the unusual, sharp right-angled turn at one end of the bridge - it seems like there should have been a better way to build it. But maybe that's just a myth. Eitherway, the bridge was revolutionary for its time. Not just because of the way it was constructed, but also because it made the journey across the river much safer. The Spey is the fastest-flowing river in Scotland and until the construction of bridges, people had to rely on small ferries to reach the other side. But the waters were often treacherous. With the arrival of bridges like the one near Craigellachie, the movement of people and goods across the region became easier.

[SOUND: foot steps - walking on gravel]

I follow a footpath from the small parking area, past trees and shrubs, the soft ground covered in brown needles. Dampening the sounds of my steps. Then the riverbank comes into view. Reddish sand leading towards brown-green water, shallow at first, so you can easily see the stone pebbles on the ground. But further from the shore, the water gets visibly darker and deeper. Fallen leaves float on the surface. Dancing on the currents of the fast-moving water. I look up at the grey metallic iron bridge. The bottom struts look like an army of Saltires holding up the weight, possibly more decorative than functional. On both ends of the bridge there are two fake-medieval towers with arrow slits and crenellated battlements. Like a fortress, the bridge stands at a key position on the river.

After a short while I return to my car and get back on the road. Up the hill through the village of Craigellachie, past its iconic whisky hotel whose yellow walls I can see through the thick cover of trees. Facing the street, the massive windows of the Craigellachie Distillery are wide open, allowing the fresh autumn air to stream into the otherwise toasty stillhouse. I can see the giant copper stills, reflecting the daylight back at me, invitingly enticing.

But of course, today is not a day for whisky - I'm driving after all, and those two don't mix well. But I do have one more stop to make before I reach Dufftown - and it is connected to the whisky industry. You could say without it, we wouldn't have very much whisky to drink at all.

Just as I pass the last houses of Craigellachie, my stop comes into view, I indicate right and pull up in the car park.

The Speyside Cooperage is one of many cooperages around the country. Coopering, that is the ancient art of making casks. Before a grain spirit can call itself Scottish whisky, it must mature in an oak cask for at least 3 years and one day. That's the law. And with hundreds of million litres of whisky produced every year - we need a lot of casks.

Now, the casks used for Scottish whisky are usually "second-hand". They were built to store bourbon or sherry, and are then sold on to the distilleries. This is not only cheaper than building new casks, but it also gives the whisky its distinct colours and flavour profiles. And then they are used, over and over again, turning spirit into whisky. They do this for around 60 years, before they find some other purpose, being turned into furniture, flower tubs or decoration. So, while most Scottish coopers don't have to build new casks on a daily basis, the casks need checked over, repaired and re-charred before they can be filled up with new spirit again.

And that's exactly what the coopers at the Speyside Cooperage do. The tour of the cooperage begins with a short film about the craft, including some footage of coopers charring the wood with flamethrowers, or rolling their casks through clouds of steam - impressive, no doubt, but a little dramatic.

I'm much more interested in the second part of the tour, where our guide takes us up to the actual workshop and we see the coopers in action.

[SOUND: cooperage noises - cooperage 5 file, esp. from 00:25]

Here at the Speyside Cooperage, there are 14 coopers and 7 apprentices. It takes them 4 years to learn all the skills and they often go on to work around the globe, perfecting their skills in other parts of the drinks industry.

A skilled cooper checks and fixes around 25 casks a day, although, our guide tells us, that two brothers once went head to head and fixed 50 each. One of their coopers, David Mackenzie, even holds the world record for the fastest assembly of a cask - just over 3 minutes, less than half the previous record.

Casks are made without nails and glue. Just metal hoops and physics hold the casks together, sealing tightly whatever is filled inside. Although, porous as it is, some of the spirit evaporates through the wood with every year the whisky matures. The angel's share as it's called, rising up to the heavens.

Outside on the yard, I spot the barrels that are ready to be distributed back to distilleries across the region. 70 to 100,000 casks sit here at any time - empty of course, don't you get any ideas. They are stacked up in pyramids. 12, 13, 14 rows tall. How they do this without the casks rolling away, is a miracle - one that makes the whisky industry so alluring to me.

I pick up a miniature dram from the cooperage's gift shop,

[SOUND: driving sounds]

drive up to my B&B and settle in for the night.

The next morning, I begin my day with a walk around Dufftown. As sleepy as the village may seem today, it was once the beating heart of the region - and in many ways it still is. Home to seven active distilleries, including one of the largest in the country, it is a must-see for anyone who travels on the Malt Whisky Trail.

Its iconic Clock Tower can be seen from all four main roads as you approach the town centre. A beautiful tower made from white and pink granite, and topped with crenellated battlements. It was once used as the town gaol and later as the burgh chambers. Funnily enough, there was an illicit still in the tower's cellar at that time - well hidden from the excise men, the waft of fermentation believed to belong to one of the many other whisky distilleries in town.

[SOUND: Fairy village sound file - or something similar: woods, small stream, birds singing]

From the tower, I walk through the hamlet of Mortlach and down across the River Dullan, which - together with the River Fiddich, into which it flows - gives life to the distilleries of the village. My walk leads me on footpaths through long grass and light woodlands, above the steep river banks and along the running water, to the Giant's Chair and the Giant's Cradle, two rock formations carved by water, many, many years ago. A little further, I discover the colourful Fairy Village, where the faerie folk of Dufftown have built a miniature version of the town, complete with a Clock Tower and even a distillery.

Which brings me back to the actual reason for my trip and this story. Whisky. And not too little.

Back in Dufftown, I make my way to the clock tower and spot a group of people already gathering and waiting. Michelle, our guide, is wearing a tartan skirt and as soon as we start walking, stories start flowing out of her. About the way distillery workers used to get paid, at least in part, with new spirit. How they'd steal some more of the whisky for their own consumption and how that was accepted by the distilleries, until a doctor - concerned for his patients' health and wellbeing - made them put a stop to that.

Luckily, we don't have that problem today, and so, while we stand in Michelle's impressive whisky shed - the first stop of our tour - she pours us our first dram.

[SOUND: whisky pouring file]

A 14-year-old Macallan, bottled independently by Gordon MacPhail. And with it, she hands us a piece of sticky toffee pudding, homemade by her mum.

I'm on a whisky walking tour of Dufftown. A great way to learn about whisky and enjoy a few drams, without having to drive your car. Today's tour is the connoisseur's walk, which takes 4.5 hours. We will walk to all the distilleries in Dufftown - present and past, nine in total, and each dram is paired with some delicious local food.

Michelle is from the area and knows the whisky industry inside out. She's quick and witty, as she tells us some of the behind-the-scenes secrets that the distilleries might not want you to know, and stories about the drams at hand. At each stop, she pours us two different expressions. Not full measures of course, but enough to keep us merry. At most stops she includes an official bottling from the distillery, the way it's supposedly supposed to be, as well as a special edition that was bottled by an independent bottler, who often do something a little bit different.

Along the way, she tells stories.

[SOUND: Michelle storytelling file in the background - if that works]

About the way whisky was made in the past, and what has changed about the process today - a hint: not all that much. About people like William Grant, who founded Glenfiddich Distillery, Charles Doig, who designed the characteristic whisky pagoda, or John Walker, who's responsible for possibly the most famous blended whisky in the world. She shows us what a Copper Dog is and explains the workings of wormtubs. How much it costs to buy a copper still and why distilleries tend to be white-washed.

And of course, she pours drams. Whiskies I know, and whiskies I had never even heard of. Pittyvaich, Singleton, Mortlach and Glendullan. Glenfiddich, Kinvinie, and Balvenie - she even throws in some Highland and Islay whisky for good measure and comparison. With it she serves chocolate and cheese, shortbread and salmon. A sip here, a bite there. First on its own, then both together in your mouth. Comparing which flavours are released by the combination of textures and tastes.

By the time we reach the final stop of our tour at Balvenie, Michelle has turned a group of strangers into whisky connoisseurs, exchanging taste notes, picking favourites and least favourites, and sharing our passion. As I sip my last dram, the sky has turned pink and my knees a little soft - that's what trying 16 different whiskies does to you.

And so, I eventually find myself sitting on that bar stool at the Seven Stills restaurant. The owners Patrick and Rose fell in love with the Speyside, sold up and moved here from France. They restored the historic inn and now, while Patrick cooks up a delicious French storm in the kitchen, Rose pours drinks at the bar, where you can choose from over 300 different whiskies.

Merry and warm, I sit at the bar, examine the shelves lined by bottles filled with water of life. Confident after learning about Dufftown whiskies from the best, I order a dram along with my meal. I savour every bite and every sip, while I watch other guests come and go. The whisky-inspired artwork blends in well with the French chansons coming from the speaker behind the bar. The chef makes a round of the tables, chatting to guests, telling them about the meals they just enjoyed.

I don't know if it's the whisky or just the perfection of this moment, but everything here feels like it's meant to be.

Finally, whisky galore, at last.

{SOUND - Jingle: tbc}

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I hope you enjoyed this story about my journey on the Malt Whisky Trail in the Speyside. I loved working on another whisky episode for this season, and I particularly enjoyed the research trip I did for this story. It's a tough job, but somebody had to do it.

Don't forget you can see pictures from this trip and previous stories on our website, wildforscotland.com. There you'll also find the link to transcripts and my travel tips I share in every episode.

And now, it's time for the practical part of the show - here are my top 5 travel tips to visit the Speyside and experience the Malt Whisky Trail.

Tip Number 1: Stay in Dufftown

There are many places to stay in the Speyside - from dedicated whisky hotels to villages with distilleries. But when you visit the Speyside on a road trip, I suggest staying in Dufftown. Not only is it the Whisky Capital of the World, it's also great because there are quite a few distilleries in walking distance, so you can leave your car behind. I stayed at Davaar B&B, a lovely bed and breakfast in the heart of Dufftown, just a stone's throw from the Clock Tower, the Seven Stills restaurant and the whisky distilleries.

Tip Number 2: Book a whisky walking tour

If you love whisky, but also driving, you'll soon face a dilemma. You'll have to choose one or the other. While distilleries usually offer small bottles to take away any drams that are included in your tour and tasting, it's simply not the same. I was so glad I discovered the Dufftown Distilleries Walk with Speyside Tours. Our guide Michele was amazing and it was a

great way to learn about many different Speyside whiskies without having to drive to multiple distilleries. I thought it was the perfect tour to include on a whisky road trip.

Tip Number 3: Do at least one proper distillery tour

There's nothing quite like seeing how it's done right at the source. A distillery tour usually includes a walk around the facilities and a few drams to taste. Seeing that the Speyside is Scotland's most prolific whisky region, so there is no shortage of distilleries to visit - many have visitor centres and offer public tours. If you're looking for value for money - I really enjoyed my tour at Aberlour, which included 5 drams at the tasting. But, you can also tour Glenfiddich, Glenlivet, Macallan or Cardhu - just to name a few.

Tip Number 4: Visit for the Spirit of Speyside Festival

Spirit of Speyside is an annual whisky festival with hundreds of whisky events across the region. There is something for everyone, whether you are new to whisky or an expert connoisseur. At the time of recording this in 2021, there is still time to organise a spontaneous trip to the Speyside this weekend - the festival runs from the 3rd to the 8th of November. Or start planning ahead for the years to come.

Tip Number 5: Look beyond whisky

And finally, a word of advice - or rather encouragement for anyone who might not enjoy whisky all that much. There are many other things to do and see in the Speyside. From historic site like the Craigellachie Bridge or Ballindalloch Castle, to hikes near Dufftown or on the Speyside Way, the region has a lot to offer whether you're a whisky fan or not.

I'll pop the link to my Speyside travel guide in the show notes.

{SOUND: Podcast jingle}

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to the Speyside and the Malt Whisky Trail.

Next week, we're back on the coast, but for once, we're not heading to the west, but turn our attention to the serene east coast of Scotland.

Thank you so much for listening to Wild for Scotland. Before I let you go, let me tell you about my Patreon. You can support this show in many ways, but if financial giving is in the cards for you, why not join our Patreon from £3 per month. You'll get access to bonus materials and some behind-the-scenes glimpses.

You'll find the link in the show notes.

Wild for Scotland is written and hosted by me, Kathi Kamleitner. Fran Turauskis is the producer and editor of the show. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight, the Tartan Trailburner and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next time when we travel down a different road in Scotland.

{post-rol AD}
