

Driven to drink

She still might not be a 'Scotch anorak' but Natalie Wilson learnt to appreciate whisky on a short holiday round the western islands

It was an idea born last New Year's Eve on a visit to Keswick with some whisky-mad friends who sniffed out the town's wee whisky shop selling, among the acres of alcohol, distillery maps of Scotland.

To be honest, I've never been a fan of the stuff but I had long wanted to explore Scotland, never getting much further than Glasgow and Edinburgh, and once the others realised the advantages of having a non whisky fan and ready made designated driver on board, the plan was hatched.

And so it was many months later the four of us headed north. We had decided early on to focus our attentions on Islay and the west coast and, being open-minded types, we widened our brief to include not only whisky but all the best Scottish food and drink we could lay our hands on.

First on the itinerary was Inveraray, for no other reason than a friend recommended a nice B&B there - Claonaigh House (www.argyll-scotland.demon.co.uk). Oh, and I believe someone may have mentioned there was a particularly well-stocked whisky shop there. It's a lovely little town with an attractive castle on the shores of Loch Fyne, which gives its name to the Loch Fyne Oyster Bar (www.lochfyne.com).

Branches of the chain can now be found all over Britain but we took



Colourful: Tobermory on Mull



Relaxing: Bowmore distillery on Islay

the chance to sample some amazing fish and seafood where it all began. It can be pricey but the website often has good deals; we had two courses, including salmon smoked to perfection, and a glass of wine for £11.

And don't leave town without stopping for a drink in the George Hotel, where the bar staff will be more than happy to recommend a whisky to suit your tastes.

Next stop, Oban and the Dungallan House Hotel. There were fears this could well be our final resting place, by the time we had worked our way through the 100-plus varieties in the dedicated whisky bar. Proprietor Michael Stevenson-Coates was adamant

there was a single malt for everyone out there and by the end of the night, I had to agree with him. I just couldn't remember

Even after all the tours, the explanations, the seeing it in action, I still don't understand how they all come out so different

which one it was the next morning.

Oban is a bustling town with handsome buildings overlooking a sheltered harbour, even better when the sun comes out for a wee

while as it did for us. Have a wander up to the bizarre McCaig's Tower, a granite amphitheatre overlooking the town and worth the climb for the lovely views, and make time for a tour of the distillery. We did - the first of eight we would visit in six days. Most of the detail of the chemistry involved washed a few metres over my head at first, but by the fourth or fifth tour I was starting to get it.

From Oban it's just a 40 minute ferry ride to the beautiful island of Mull, where we headed for Tobermory, the colourful harbour better known to the CBeebies generation as TV's *Balamory*. While we waited for our tour of

Tobermory distillery (of course) we had a drive around the island. A day trip to Mull is really fun but you'll be disappointed if you hope to see the whole island. We didn't even cover half of it and there was certainly no time for a side trip to Iona. But we couldn't hang about - we were half way through our holiday and had only been to two distilleries. So after our second night in Oban and a delicious breakfast of kippers to send us on our way, we again headed for the ferry terminal. This time, destination Islay. We were done with the warm-up, it was time to hit the whisky trail good and proper.

I don't know whether it was the four hours on the ferry or just the tangible change of pace, but when we landed on Islay, I immediately felt like I was abroad. We had decided to base ourselves in Port Ellen due to its proximity to distilleries. I mean, you can barely move for distilleries on Islay - eight of them on an island barely 20 miles long - but on the road out of Port Ellen there are three within two miles, Laphroaig, Lagavulin and Ardbeg, each with a picturesque coastal setting. Now that's what I call convenient.

We opted for the distillery tours at Lagavulin and Laphroaig, followed by lunch at Ardbeg's highly recommended Old Kiln Cafe. We started early, with the first tour at 9.30am, and when it



notes: Above, Natalie at the Lagavulin distillery and, below, Natalie with Neil Rutherford at the Laphroaig distillery



came to the generous free samples ("Are you sure there isn't another one you'd like a wee try of?") I began to feel glad I was the designated driver and had an excuse for winking out.

After lunch we headed to the eastern most point of the island, a horseshoe shaped village called Portmahaven. Luckily the number one whisky fan was out cold in the back of the car after one too many free drams so we were able

to drive straight past the Bruichladdich distillery without complaint - three was definitely enough for one day.

The drizzle had settled in so we somehow found ourselves joining the tail end of a wake in a pub. Don't get me wrong, if you are into walking, fishing or bird watching, I'm sure there are plenty of other ways to spend a lovely few days on Islay. But our mission was to consume as many calories as

possible of local produce and no one was going to lead us astray. Anyway, this was no ordinary pub. This was An tigh seinnse, a tiny, front room of a bar, serving the most delicious home cooked cakes and puddings imaginable. The main menu looked amazing too; must go back one day when I haven't just eaten...

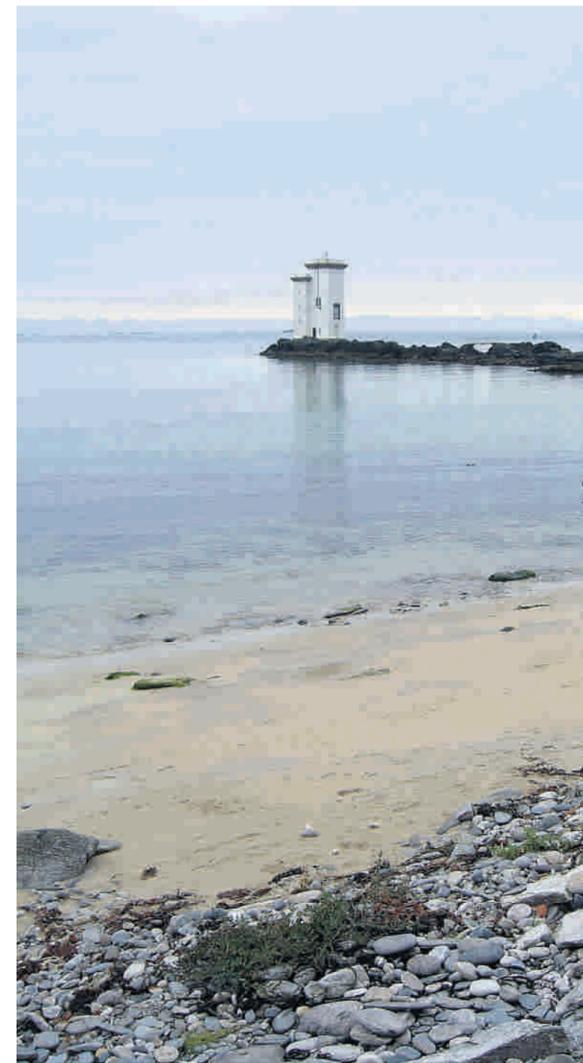
Next morning, I decided to sit out the first distillery tour of the day in Bowmore and explored the town's round church, had a look at a few knick-knack shops then enjoyed a rare and incredibly relaxing hour of sunshine sitting reading and watching the boats bob in the small harbour. In the afternoon we headed to the north eastern corner of the island, home to the Bunnahabhain and Caol Ila distilleries, both with lovely views across to Jura.

They say it's the peat and the water that give Islay whiskies their distinctive flavour. Even after all the tours, the explanations, the seeing it in action, I still don't understand how they all come out tasting so different. And, dare I say it, so good. Because yes, I was indeed converted. I don't think I could ever be such a Scotch anorak as some of the people we encountered on our travels - although some may argue eight distilleries in less than a week is pretty darn committed - but I certainly won't be so quick to volunteer to drive on our next trip north of the border. Speyside here we come...

travelfacts

Natalie stayed at the Dungallan Country House Hotel, Oban (www.dungallanhotel-oban.co.uk), courtesy of Visit Scotland and sailed with Caledonian MacBrayne ferries - see www.calmac.co.uk for details of prices and times.

Visit www.eatScotland.com which features over 600 restaurants across Scotland; food festivals and trails and information on regional flavours.



Tranquil: Port Ellen on Islay

IRVING'S COACHES HOLIDAYS

14-17 NOV	'MORECAMBE' - LOTHERSDALE HOTEL, (T&T) 4 DAYS	£130.00
17-21 NOV	'BLACKPOOL' - BLENCARN HOTEL 4 NTS 5 DAYS *REDUCED* FROM	£140.00
17-21 NOV	'OBAN' - CALEDONIAN HOTEL 4 NIGHTS 5 DAYS	£195.00
24-28 NOV	'BOURNEMOUTH' - TROUVILLE HOTEL 4 NIGHTS 5 DAYS	£215.00
5-7 DEC	'LONDON' - NOVOTEL EUSTON, 2 NIGHTS 3 DAYS	£130.00
14-16 DEC	'EDINBURGH XMAS SHOPPER WKEND - JURYS INN 2 NIGHTS *NEW*	£130.00
23-27 DEC	'ISLE OF SKYE' - XMAS BREAK, DUNOLLIE HOTEL 5 DAYS	£280.00
31 DEC - 3 JAN 09	'BLACKPOOL' BLENCARN HOTEL, 3 NIGHTS 4 DAYS FROM	£210.00
13-15 FEB '09	'LONDON' - HOLIDAY INN BLOOMSBURY, 2 NIGHTS, 3 DAYS	£145.00
16-20 MAR '09	'BALLACHULISH' - BALLACHULISH HOTEL, 4 NIGHTS, 3 DAYS	£199.00
20-23 MAR '09	'MORECAMBE' - LOTHERSDALE HOTEL, 3 NIGHTS, 4 DAYS	£120.00
23-27 MAR '09	'PAIGHTON' - QUEENS HOTEL, 4 NIGHTS, 5 DAYS	£165.00

Our 2009 brochure available now
Please Note: All day excursions must be paid for in advance and a £20 deposit is required when booking a holiday for 2008/2009

WE SHALL BE PICKING UP IN WEST CUMBRIA FOR MOST OF OUR HOLIDAYS - PLEASE ASK FOR DETAILS.
PICK-UP TO BE REQUESTED AT TIME OF BOOKING IF REQUIRED
Why not give our website a visit: www.irvings-coaches.co.uk
Parking available at our depot

3a The Crescent, Carlisle, Cumbria CA1 1QN
Telephone: 01228 521777

Holland is much more than tulips and Amsterdam

By Rosalind Gibb



Leisurely: Above, steam train from Hoor to Medemblik. Below, Broek, in Waterland



THERE must have been a few sore heads on arrival at the port of IJmuiden. The MS Princess of Norway, which had sailed overnight from Newcastle, had played host to several hen and stag parties who had made the most of the ship's late night restaurants and all night clubs.

As they stumbled off in the direction of Amsterdam - just 18 miles from IJmuiden - we were met by our friendly guide Martin. We were here to see that there is more to Holland than coffee shops and red light districts; or as he put it, to see the natural Holland and enjoy the country "as it is".

And we certainly did. In the warm autumn sun, the landscape was like a painting: rolling, green farmland as far as the eye can see, and clear, calm waterways dotted with windmills. But this timeless beauty also illustrates Holland's industrious past. Over centuries, large areas of flat farmland were reclaimed from the sea. Known as polders, they are extremely fertile and are protected from flooding by dykes and dams.

Then there are the cyclists, who can be seen everywhere, gently

riding along and seeming not to have a care in the world. Unlike the UK, bikes are given as much status as cars, and there are cycle routes both in towns and on country roads, making it an ideal way to travel.

Our first stop was Haarlem, a charming market town that boasts a rich history. Among the highlights here are De Adriaan windmill, where visitors can learn about the centuries-old technology of turning wind into productive energy, and enjoy commanding views of the town.

The market in the centre of Haarlem should not be missed; it's a great way to soak up the atmosphere as this is where locals like to spend a Saturday morning.

Nearby is Den Helder, home to the Marine Museum. Its interactive displays have plenty of information about the country's naval past, but the highlight is a submarine, still kitted out with the original equipment and furniture. Our guide was an engineer in the navy for 32 years. Now retired, he volunteers at the museum, such is his enthusiasm for the subject. And he had some cracking tales to tell as he showed us round. I felt claustrophobic being in there for

20 minutes, but the narrow vessel could sleep dozens of men, who spent months at sea cheek by jowl.

Showing that Holland does indeed have a diverse range of things to do, we moved from submarines to beekeeping and visited Opperdoes, where we enjoyed the company of beekeeper Jan Glazenborg. He showed us the process of making honey (and it is fascinating watching all those busy bees up close) and explained how the changing environment means his livelihood is under threat.

We stayed at Hotel Petit Nord, a very comfortable, four star hotel in the harbour town of Hoorn.

The first port of call on Sunday was the Stoomtrein Museum, where visitors can learn about the history of this once popular form of transport, and the renovation work being undertaken to return several trains to their former glory.

The museum is also the boarding point for a scenic journey through Holland. Between March and November the steamtrains meander between Hoorn, Medemblik and Enkhuizen, with a trip on an old fashioned steamboat along Lake IJsselmeer. By all accounts the journey is

particularly stunning in spring, when the tulip fields are in bloom.

At Waterland, an area just a few miles north of Amsterdam, we enjoyed a trip on a whisper-boat. Waterland Recreation hires out boats for a minimum of half a day.

The boat's electric engine means you travel in near silence, and with glorious sunshine, panoramic views of the lush landscape, and an on-board picnic, it was a heavenly way to spend a Sunday.

travelfacts

Rosalind was a guest of the Holland Tourist Board and DFDS Seaways. She travelled from Newcastle to Holland on MS Princess of Norway, where prices start at £68 one way for a seaview cabin.

Rooms at Hotel Petit Nord in Hoorn start at 80 Euros. Amsterdam Guided Tours offers tailor-made tours of Holland, travelling by comfortable minibus with a personal guide. Visit www.ag-tours.nl for more information.

Visit www.holland.com to find out more about North Holland.



Historic: Hoorn, in northern Holland, makes a good centre from which to tour

Q: Is your business celebrating an **Anniversary?**

Q: Would you like a **Promotional Feature?**

A: Call Julia on **01228 612307**

Print & Online