

# SINGLE MALT ODYSSEY

*There is no greater journey for the whisky connoisseur than the route that leads north from Glasgow through Scotland's Highlands and islands. The noted photographer Colin Hampden-White recently embarked on the ultimate journey for the spirit: LUX presents his photography and account of his experiences here*

This is one of the greatest journeys a connoisseur can take: along the coast and islands and through the Highlands of Scotland. While the whiskies themselves vary from the peaty and smoky to the creamy and complex, the scenery and the food can be equally sublime.

Many of the whiskies I tasted on this journey are rare, some of them impossible to find unless you ask the right questions at the distillery.

My first destination after leaving Glasgow, on the west coast of Scotland, was a short visit to the Isle of Islay. The island has a small airstrip and is only a short flight from Glasgow airport. On arrival the heavens opened, but it didn't detract from the tranquil beauty of the island or my sense of anticipation. My driver took me past the fields where the peat is dug for the maltings at Port Ellen, and I made a stop there to be shown how the barley is prepared for the various distilleries the maltings supply. The smells are captivating; although not lit, the sweet scent of the peat-burning kilns lingers in the air.

On the other side of the maltings two pagodas still loom marking the place where the old Port Ellen distillery stood. Closed in 1983, Port Ellen produced an almost mythical whisky which is very rare and sought after today. A small amount of this whisky still exists in a few well-cared for barrels and tiny amounts are released once a year. The tenth expression was a 31 year old at the end of 2010. Only a handful of people know how much Port Ellen is left still in the barrel, and they're certainly not letting on.

On from Port Ellen to another mythical place, where whisky distilling in Scotland began after Aquavit first arrived. Whatever the weather you can't help but feel something special when you arrive in Lagavulin; the white of the buildings is set against the backdrop of the tempestuous sky and the warehouses sit silently holding their precious golden liquid, almost hoping you won't notice them, and take their treasure





TALISKER

Talisker's seaside location is framed by rugged mountains



Drumuir Library

away. After an authentic island lunch of the freshest seafood and other delicious local produce including smoked hams and venison we ventured into one of the warehouses, sat down with distillery manager Georgie Crawford and began the serious business of tasting.

The main expression of Lagavulin is a 16 year old. Its dark golden colour gives off aromas of caramel and toffee with puffs of smoke and a hint of citrus. On contact with the tongue, the smoke and peat build up, retaining a sweetness reminiscent of boiled sweets. Hints of banana, metamorphosing into banoffee pie, die down to allow the smoke to return as the warmth coats your mouth. The flavours all linger on the palate for some time, receding and coming forth again like waves.



Kinloch in Spring

Other expressions of Lagavulin include a Distiller's Edition, where the whisky is matured in sherry casks for a brief time at the end of its life. This heightens the fruit in the flavours and gives a little more caramel sweetness. There is also an expression only available from the distillery. This whisky was initially made as Distiller's Edition but then stored for longer in blank or tired casks for 3 to 4 years. It's mellower than the Distiller's Edition; creamier, with hints of oranges and a drier finish. Of the 6,000 bottles made fewer than 1,000 are now left at the distillery.

After the tasting Dr Nick Morgan, historian and director of Heritage and Scotch Whisky at Diageo, brought us out onto the pier in front of the distillery to explain the layers of whisky history. As he did so, the clouds suddenly parted to reveal an almost miraculously deep blue sky as if to make certain of a return visit.

From the small airport, now bathed in sunshine, I boarded a plane to Aberdeen, thence to Speyside. There sits Drumuir; a spectacular mock-gothic Victorian castle whose imposing façade belies the sumptuous interior and a very Scottish welcome. Imposing hall, elegant atrium, sumptuous bedrooms and a dining room with a solid wood carved ceiling are all wonderful but the library is the centrepiece.

Like many other castle libraries, it has fabulous wall-to-wall



The soon to be released, limited edition (250 bottles) 34 year old Talisker is expected to sell for £900



Michael Smith, head chef at The Three Chimneys



The turbulent waters around Skye produces some of the world's finest seafood

A peat digger at work



Lagavulin, home to monstrously peaty single-malt



The Isle of Skye

**While the whiskies themselves vary from the peaty and smoky to the creamy and complex, the scenery and the food can be equally sublime**

wooden shelves, but there is not a book to be seen. The shelves are filled with whisky; every distillery Diageo owns is represented on the shelves. And if you happen to want a change, all these other brands are here too, and they are all for drinking. A lifetime would not be enough to drink the same dram twice. Drumuir is not open to the public but can sometimes be hired by special arrangement with Diageo.

After drinks, we moved on to a fabulous dinner, the pinnacle experience of which was a hot chocolate fondant served with a frozen Dalwhinnie 15 year old. The temperature contrasts release the fullest flavours of both; a marvellous sensory experience.

Full of the lightest black pudding I've tasted, akin to morthea, we left for Skye. Through Speyside with its undulating lush green hills, past Inverness and along Loch Ness. The road looks straight on the map but it snakes along the banks of the loch, allowing tantalising views across the water as we approach Skye.

Skye wasn't showing off its best weather but once at Talisker we relaxed in their marquee next to the sea. Its transparent side affords you the opportunity to feast on the freshest that the sea and the hills have to offer, drinking in whisky and breath-taking view alike, without having to experience all that the weather has to offer!

I headed on in to the distillery to find out about how Talisker is made lead by distillery manager Charlie Smith. Like wine, whisky has a wonderful story about how it came to be made in a particular place, how it is made and how the distillery has survived and thrived in such a remote area of the world.

Talisker's main expressions are a 10 year old, an 18 year old, and a 25 year old. These whiskies are on the whole more floral than Lagavulin, which is created by an increased time in fermentation. There is less smokiness and peat, but still



The rugged coast of the Isle of Skye



The copper stills at Talisker



Faraway gourmet at the Three Chimneys

enough to be obviously a west coast of Scotland whisky. The 18 year old has extra flavours of crystallised ginger, oranges and a bit of chocolate, and the 25 year old holds the extra complexity its age deserves. I tasted a real treat here.

Not yet released, there is a 34 year old Talisker on its way. There will only be 250 bottles for the world market and it will retail at around the £900 mark. It is a marvel to taste, full of caramel and flora turning into Fry's chocolate mints with a delicate puff of smoke to let you know you are still in Talisker territory. The finish goes on forever and it's a smooth and well balanced dram to remember. It arrives in time for this Christmas.

For the last two nights of our stay in Scotland we relaxed in beautiful Kinloch Lodge. It's a glorious hotel run by Sir Godfrey and his wife Claire, Lady Macdonald, with fantastic views on the edge of a sea loch. The staff are as wonderfully warm as the open fires, and a Michelin star restaurant delivers superb cuisine with wines to match.

The next morning we headed off for the trip of a lifetime.



Lagavulin Distiller's Edition is matured in sherry casks for a brief period

From the south of the island we took power boats around Skye. Seeing this island, and its surrounding islands, from the water is an experience not to miss. The remoteness and dramatic weather heighten the beauty of the land and make it seem very mysterious. But it had another secret to reveal. Having stopped off in a few coves, we finally rounded the island to the westerly side and the skies parted to reveal the Cullin Ridge. It's a spectacular series of peaks that form a spine through the heart of the island. Hardly ever do these mountains show themselves, but today we were blessed and it wasn't even lunch time yet.

Travel to the north of Skye should be rewarded by a visit to the Three Chimneys in Colbost, Dunvegan. Head Chef, Michael Smith, transforms the local produce into a culinary delight. Because of their opening hours, they don't fall into the Michelin Star system, and I am sure are the better for it. The food is unpretentiously good; simple food whose amazing flavours are matched by the presentation. With such an international reputation, book before you go.



View from Kinloch Lodge

After a marvelous lunch of oysters, their speciality Partan Bree, a Scottish crab soup, followed by monkfish, we headed back to enjoy a rest at Kinloch Lodge before making our way back to Talisker to enjoy dinner au bord de la mer. The sun had mellowed to a deep pink and danced in and out of wisps of cloud over the loch and above the distillery. It is a view I shall hold with me forever. Alongside delicious food we were enthralled by tales from two of the world's best story tellers and whisky aficionados, Dave Broom and Charlie Maclean. And so with stories in my head, views in my memory and the great flavour of whisky still dancing on my tongue, we headed home.

Autumn and winter are considered by some to be the greatest seasons of all to visit Scotland: the most difficult but the most genuine and dramatic. And if you can't get there, look through these pages with a dram of single malt that's old enough to vote.

*Portraits by Colin Hampden-White of the greatest Scotch whisky distillers will be exhibited in Rebecca Hossack's New York Gallery on Mott Street in January 2012.* 📍



The fermentation room at Talisker