





Scotch & water

Approaching a distillery from the sea offers a different perspective

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It was 18 May, World Whisky Day, that I joined an international group of 26 people for a 6 day whisky and water odyssey through the Inner Hebrides and around Kintyre, aboard the three-masted tall-ship "Thalassa". Once aboard, World Whisky Day seemed to respectfully evanesce in the presence of a joyful array of some of Scotland's fine single malts lining the bar of the main saloon – all to be tasted during the next few days. Many to be tasted at their maritime source.

The whisky though was, transiently, upstaged by an elaborate clock which was being clamped into position by Alex Moens, a man bearing the features and demeanour of an old sea dog and who was to lead the cruise through numerous distilleries and tastings. The timepiece, like me was going to sea under sail for the first time and was a replica of John Harrison's 18th century invention which provided accurate time on board a pitching and rolling ship, enabling the calculation of longitude.

"Very impressive" I thought. But not as impressive as the re-assuring presence of GPS in the wheelhouse! During the cruise the clock stopped in the course of what I can best describe as a handbrake turn, under full sail, as we turned away from the coast of Ireland.

The first day's sailing was an 8-hour journey from Troon to Port Ellen, Islay: a lazy low tempo affair across an unusually calm, syrupy looking sea which mid-morning was suddenly broken by a dorsal fin about 100 metres off the port side. To this landlubber the distance from dorsal to tail fin suggested a boat-eating shark. It was a basking shark, one of the world's largest and most docile sea creatures. This giant gently passed within 50 metres.

The first of two on board tastings took place shortly before arriving at Port Ellen and while only two of the six whiskies tasted were from Islay, appropriately an Ardbeg and a Bowmore came out as favourites. Perhaps a subliminal influence from the looming charm of the island.

Little introduction is needed to Islay's natural beauty or its status as a whisky destination. All but one of its eight distilleries is located beside the sea. The synthesis of peat, smoke, salt and sea is by nature, in the air. Nowhere has the single malt renaissance been more apparent than on this enchanting island. Next day the beautifully located Lagavulin distillery hosted our first visit but the second morning stole the Islay scenic show as we sailed from Port Ellen around the east coast to anchor in the bay at Bunnahabhain, going ashore by dinghy to take the magnificent drive to Cao Ila with its stunning views across the sound to the Paps of Jura.

Islay had delivered the perfect sense of place that travels with its whiskies across the world.

Sailing out of Bunnahabhain a light northerly wind carried good news. The next day we would have the following northerly driving us virtually due south to Ballycastle in Northern Ireland.

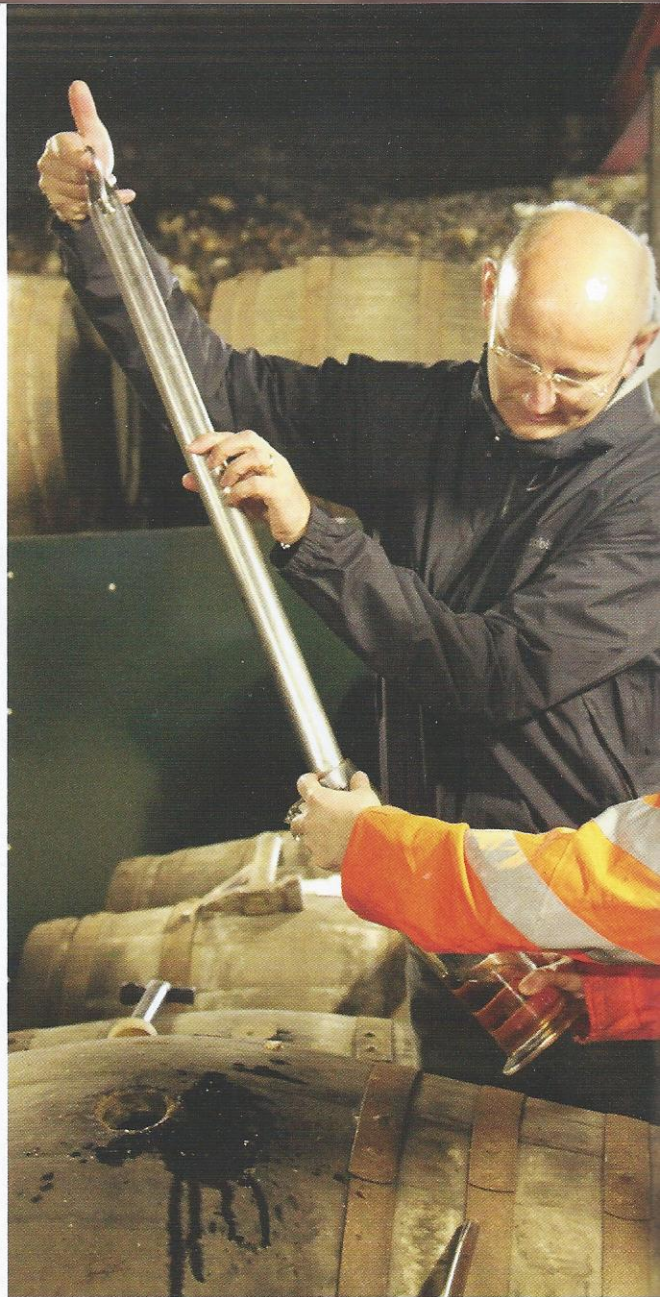
We would be under full sail all the way to Northern Ireland's world famous distillery – Bushmills.

Thalassa anchored in a cove on the southerly tip of Jura close to Claig Castle, as much a scene of mythology as fact and from where the Lord of the Isles would

have once controlled the sea to the north and the south. At the other end of Jura is Barnhill, the cottage that Orwell escaped to in 1947 and where he completed his seminal work, *1984*. On Jura, in his seclusion he should have been safe from the spectres of Big Brother and Newspeak. Walking on deck after sunset, the rigging had started to slap in the wind, the sea was indigo. The Thalassa had assumed its own island status in this sea of tranquillity.

This sailor sleeping in a cabin at the sharp end of the ship needed no wake up call for the 6.00am departure from Jura. One hundred metres of heavy galvanised steel chain being wound onto the windlass above my head as the anchor was raised was an unparalleled maritime head-banger of an experience. By the time I reached the deck at 6.20 the crew and half the passengers were busy raising sails. If you ever take this journey never hesitate to get involved in all that rope tugging and sail setting. Jura slipped away behind hundreds of metres of rigging and sails – Thalassa headed south with a following wind and I was experiencing one of the great moments of my travelling life.

After a morning's sailing and with the Antrim Mountains of Northern Ireland



Opening pages: Looking up in to the rigging, sails set
These pages, clockwise from bottom left: Bunnahabhain Distillery, sampling from the cask, just one glorious stopping place, fellow passengers enjoying a whisky

“ Nowhere has the single malt renaissance been more apparant than on this enchanting island ”

Martin Mitchell



in clear view, the sea had become an expanse of white top two metre waves. There was no way that we could board the dinghy to get ashore for Bushmills. After some exhilarating re-trimming of the sails which interrupted an outdoor rocking and rolling encounter with a Tomatin Legacy 12, we were heading east to Campbeltown. The “Harrison” clock had stopped. Time did stand still but the GPS was functioning just fine.

Still under full sail, two hours later we were rounding the legendary Mull of Kintyre. Breathtaking is a word surely first floated for moments like this. The Thalassa would have been a fine sight from the shore.

That day at sea deserved a fitting finale. The on board organisers set up a fascinating after dinner tasting battle between Irish and Scotch whisk(e)y. In the blue corner was some formidable opposition – Carn Mor, Glenmorangie, Auchentoshan. Squaring up from the green corner stood Connemarra Cooley, Red Breast and Tyrconnell. A draw ensued on each of the three tastings. The blind taste-off between Red Breast 12 and Tomatin Legacy 12 still didn't



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night in Campbeltown. ”

deliver an outright result. Ireland punched above its weight.

In a close call I favoured the Tomatin which earlier that day I had tasted with the sea on my lips

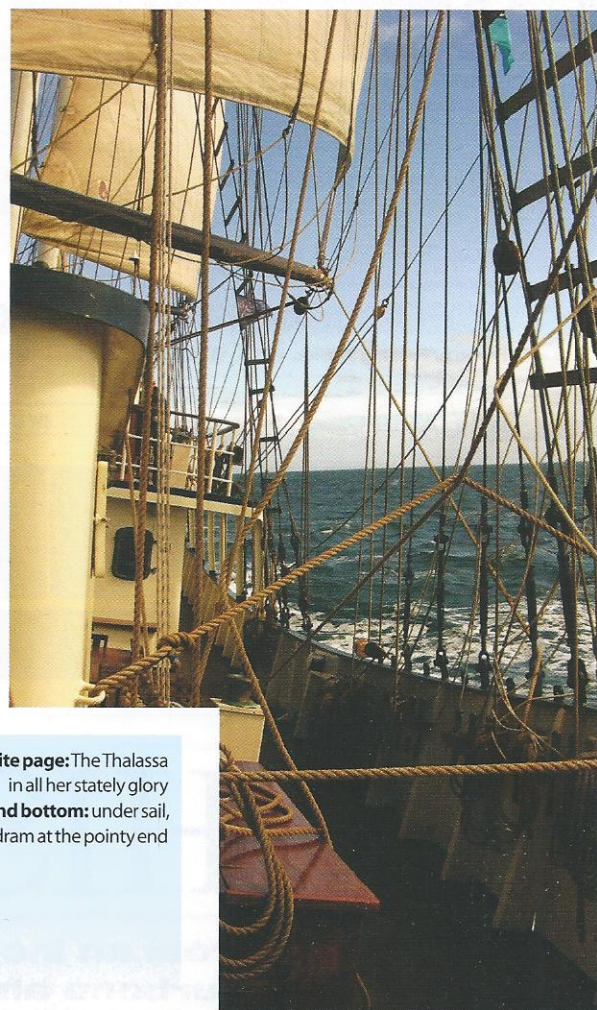
Campbeltown, once the World Capital of Whisky, now has an air of an imperial outpost. Some 30 distilleries 100 years ago, are reduced to three today. We had arrived though on the eve of the Springbank Distillers' festival and there was plenty going on that suggested the auld capital might be rising again. I made an unannounced visit to the tiny Glen Scotia distillery where a staff of three produce 150,000 litres per annum. Distillery Manager Iain McAlister seemed busy but it didn't stop him welcoming me in and giving me a free run through an establishment which has existed and produced through thick and thin since 1832.

Dinner was a daily triumph produced from a tiny galley. Not a meal passed

without a certain whisky ingredient: langoustine, Thai curry, banana cake, all benefited from a dram – chef Dave had picked up on the zeitgeist. The culinary zenith was scallops with a whisky sauce on the second night in Campbeltown. The shellfish being bought the previous night straight off a fishing boat which had just returned from three days at sea.

Next morning sailing out of Campbeltown's beautiful bell-shaped narrow-necked cove it was easy to understand how this natural maritime refuge had become so important to sea-going trade.

The Isle of Arran could not be a better final stop before heading back to Troon. The topography of Arran is "Scotland in miniature". Once the new distillery was opened at Lochranza in 1995, Arran had a little bit of everything one expects of Scotland. Sparsely vegetated green hills swept down to Lochranza Bay where we anchored. The yellow gorse was in full



Opposite page: The Thalassa in all her stately glory
This page top and bottom: under sail, enjoying a dram at the pointy end



bloom. The sea a surprising Mediterranean blue and ahead of us the glen along which we would take a twenty minute walk to the Isle of Arran Distillers. The pristine white building had a monastic appearance with its copper towers, set against the stunning landscape. The sort of place where a rock star might seek refuge after a few rough months on the road, I thought. Hmm? Spirituality. A sense of place. Sometimes you need to be there to understand it. World Whisky Day seemed a long time ago by this point but there is no doubt that the places I took those drams are integral to the taste. Whisky, when gently conversed with, appears to have a unique ability to pick you up and transport you to the source of its life and the life sources of many whiskies had been explored during this odyssey. Slainte! ☐