



# Cruisin' for whisky

Take one boat, a group of Scotch lovers and some beautiful scenery and it's a dream come true for **Hans Offringa** as he enjoys a cruise around the whisky isles

Photo: Hans Offringa

**H**ave you ever dreamt about sailing around the beautiful whisky isles off the southwest coast of Bonnie Scotland? We did, for many years. Then we were invited to do it last spring by Jacob Dam, owner and captain of tall ship *Thalassa*. Since 2009 he's been sailing with groups of whisky aficionados around the Scottish isles, with success. Various voyagers are recurrent passengers and one of them has joined every single year. *Thalassa* can hold 36 people, including a six-man crew.

Jacob told us he had reserved a tiny but cosy cabin for us in the bow. One cannot say no to such a request and we gladly agree to document the trip for the readers of *Whisky Quarterly*. So here's a peek into the diary we wrote during a six-day sailing trip that offered us a dream come true, with a dram on the side!





## Day 1

We arrive in Troon harbour on the south-west coast of Scotland. Troon is also known for its excellent golf links. The course is even portrayed on a special tin containing a 12-year-old The Glenlivet. At 1 pm we announce ourselves to captain and crew. The deck hand shows us to our cabin where we install our gear, camera, laptop and the like. Although it is bunk beds, each cabin has a private shower and sink. In the next few hours a cosmopolitan group of whisky lovers join us for the trip; they come from the Netherlands, Belgium, Austria, Switzerland and Germany, 15 couples in all.

We have a true whisky master on board, Mr Alex Moens, who will present various tastings during the trip. His nickname is "The Timekeeper of Whisky" because he combines his liquid passion with his profession as anhrnologist. When everybody is sorted out, we motor for a few hours – no wind, alas – to the port of Lochranza on the isle of Arran. At sunset, we moor at the tiny pier, but will not visit Arran Distillery tonight; instead we are summoned to the dining area amidships.

Jacob's son Jelle is the chef and we find out how creative he can be in the confines of a very small kitchen in the heart of the ship. That evening the multinational company of 30-odd people share a wonderful captain's dinner with poached pears in Bleu d'Auvergne over rocket as a starter, followed by chicken filet and Caesar salad, joined by a 15-year-old Bowmore Darkest single malt from the isle of Islay (which we will visit in a few days). Coffee is taken with a fine Talisker 57° North.

## Day 2

Refreshed by a good night's rest and a sturdy breakfast, we are ready for a seven-hour sailing trip around the Mull of Kintyre to the Isle of Islay. It's hard work for the captain and crew because the fierce wind is accompanied by bursts of heavy rain. Half the company prefer to stay inside, playing games and enjoying a tutored tasting from Mr Timekeeper. The other half make themselves useful on deck, helping the crew with the sails. It is not obligatory – you're at your leisure. Becky attempts to take pictures while I write my online diary. Early evening we dock at Port Ellen, which is quite a manoeuvre because the wind has not died down.







Photo: Hans Offringa

## Day 3

A leisure day on Islay, the Queen of the Hebrides. No less than eight distilleries to explore, but we choose to visit our friends at iconic distillery Laphroaig, for which we'd been commissioned to write a book on their bicentennial: 1815-2015. It's great to be back and enjoy the company of good friends. We are presented with a 15-year-old version of the craitur, especially bottled for the bicentenary. After a well-spent day, we walk back to the ship for an excellent meal. After-dinner malts are accompanied by entertaining stories of our fellow passengers' adventures in trying to visit as many Islay distilleries as possible.

Photo: Hans Offringa



## Day 4

Sailing through the Sound of Islay, the small sea strait between Islay and neighbouring Jura, is a treat. With a fierce breeze in our hair, we watch seals basking in the sun on small rocky promontories, cunningly avoided by the navigation of *Thalassa's* first helmsman. We head for Bunnahabhain Distillery on the northeastern tip of Islay but cannot anchor due to strong winds and current. From a distance, we shoot images, while Mr Timekeeper offers the disappointed guests a consolation dram: a wonderful 18-year-old "Bunna".

The captain decides to turn the *Thalassa*, heading for the port of Craighouse on Jura. The sky is a beautiful blue, dotted with white clouds chasing each other. A few lucky voyagers spot a minke whale, although the rumours of basking sharks turn out to be just that. We arrive on the shore of Craighouse shortly before sunset and the ship is quickly anchored in the bay. Again we enjoy Jelle's superb cooking, feasting on freshly-caught scallops. Being on the water the whole day is sleep-inducing and we repair to our cosy cabin fairly early that evening.

Photo: Hans Offringa



## Day 5

After an early breakfast, the dinghy ferries small groups to the shore of Jura to visit the eponymous distillery and spend a few hours exploring this remarkable island: one village, one distillery, one hotel, 180 inhabitants and more than 5,000 deer! Early afternoon we return to *Thalassa* and set sail for Ballycastle in Northern Ireland. The winds are good to us and the ship builds up a speed of nine knots. The crossing is beautiful. In this stretch of sea, Scotland and Ireland are closest, about 15 miles apart from one another. That evening we're in for an authentic Irish pub crawl in the little town. We enjoy an Irish dram or two this time, while a small group of musicians play trad music in the back. This is good, this is great! We return to our temporary floating home in the small hours of the night.





Photo: Hans Offringa

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## Day 6

In the early morning we need the motor – no wind at all. But as soon as we reach the Mull of Kintyre, the wind picks up, and it's all hands on deck to man the lines. We sail into the sheltered harbour of Campbeltown, in the mid-19th century dubbed "Whisky Capital of the World", home to no less than 30 different distilleries. After the Pattison Crash at the turn of 20th century, Campbeltown closed down almost all of them. Today, only Springbank, Glengyle and Glen Scotia proudly produce a whisky that deserves its own region – it is a powerful, slightly briny dram with a whiff of smoke, but not as intense as its Islay siblings.

We are lucky – it is the annual festival and Springbank Distillery has a special tasting, conducted by its famous ambassador Mark Watt. He opens a rare cask of Glen Mhor from the early 1980s as a special treat. A beautiful, full and fruity dram. Mark fills a couple of sample bottles for us to take home for a few special whisky friends. After the tasting, we walk back to the square and enjoy the playing of Kintyre's own pipe band, world famous and just returned from an extensive tour in Europe. It is a mixture of old, young and very young musicians, all dedicated as can be. »»



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## Day 7

After a restorative night's rest, we set sail back to the isle of Arran because we have yet to visit the distillery there. It is a good five-hour trip and I spend most of my time in the steering hut with the captain and his helmsman. Suddenly, my eye catches a group of dolphins, playing alongside Thalassa. Soon I lose track of them, only to become fascinated by the diving gannets, birds with huge wingspans and brilliant white plumage.

When we anchor at Lochranza for the second time this week, the weather holds and the two-mile walk to the local distillery is a pleasant distraction from the many miles we covered on the water. Arran is sometimes called Scotland in miniature, since this small island has mountains, valleys, springs, rivers, meadows and forests. It is a place to which we hope to return for further exploration.

We run into an old acquaintance from the whisky industry who takes the two of us in to one of Arran's warehouses and draws a sample from a special cask. We taste a 10-year-old Arran malt, fully matured in a champagne cask (a real rarity), in the company of an American whisky fan, whom we had run into on Islay a few days before. He'd travelled by plane to visit his favourite distillery, Ardbeg. This gentleman is so fierce about that pungent malt that he annually organises Ardbeggeddon Day, back in the US. I tell him about our remarkable sailing trip. He nods in awe and approaches the captain for a word. I know he'll be back.

Late afternoon we leave Arran and set sail for Troon again, where a grand captain's dinner awaits us for the last night on the Thalassa, with langoustines galore, caught early that morning by a local fisherman. The food, accompanied by a fine Springbank 10 year old, couldn't get any better, nor the memories of this fantastic trip. We can cordially recommend a journey with the Thalassa. You'll love it! ♦

### About the ship

The Barquentine Thalassa is an imposing and seaworthy sailer. This three-master is one of the most beautiful and fastest sea sailers of the Dutch fleet. Rigged according to old tradition, the Thalassa is fitted with every modern safety convenience and combines adventurous sailing and comfortable enjoyment perfectly. For more information and bookings, check: [www.tallshipthalassa.nl](http://www.tallshipthalassa.nl)

Photo: Hans Olfinga





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