



— YOUR HOLIDAY DREAM TRIP —

Sail the Scottish coast

by THE WHISKY COUPLE
images courtesy of the authors

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For many years, your Whisky Couple dreamed of sailing around the beautiful whisky isles off the southwest coast of bonnie Scotland. Lochs, mulls and firths dance with craggy cliffs and cozy sea-kissing villages — many with the promise of a local distillery and a stimulating dram. To get to the *uisce beatha* — the water of life — in a comfortably-appointed tall ship cruising between sea and sky as blue as the Scottish saltire is a fine fantasy indeed!

Such a fantasy voyage became reality for your Whisky Couple this year thanks to Mr. Jacob Dam, owner and captain of the tall ship *Thalassa*. Since 2009, Dam and the *Thalassa* have been piloting whisky aficionados around the Scottish Isles. The *Thalassa* can hold 36 persons, including a six-man crew. Although such a situation is a healthy daydream for many, it's proven to be popular: Many voyagers are recurring passengers, and one of them has embarked every single year.

The “bow” on such a shiny package may be this: Jacob reserved a tiny-but-cozy cabin for us in the bow. We are to document this trip with a story and accompanying photography, something to which we gladly agree. Take 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 — Saturday, May 16

We arrive in the harbor of Troon on the southwest coast of Scotland. Troon is known for its excellent golf links: The course is even portrayed on a special tin containing 12-year-old Glenlivet. At 1 p.m. 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 there are bunk beds, each cabin has a private shower and sink. In the next few hours a cosmopolitan group of whisky lovers joins 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 over the coming days. His nickname is “The Timekeeper of Whisky,” since he combines his liquid passion with his

profession as a horologist — someone who restores clocks and watches. 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'll soon 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 arugula 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.



Mr. Timekeeper on the *Thalassa*.



Seals in the Sound of Islay.

Day 2 — Sunday, May 17

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

Day 3 — Monday, May 18

Spend a day at leisure on Islay, the Queen of the Hebrides. There are no less than eight distilleries to explore, but we choose to visit our friends at Laphroaig, an iconic distillery for which we've been commissioned to write a book on their 1815-2015 bicentennial: I still need some images and an interview. 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.

Day 4 — Tuesday, May 19

Sailing through the Sound of Islay, the small sea strait between Islay and neighbor-

ing 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 the 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 rumors of basking sharks turn out to be just

Below left: Laphroaig distillery from the Sound of Islay. Below right: Yardbeg distillery from the Sound of Islay.



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 kitchen, feasting on freshly harvested scallops. Being on the water the whole day is sleep-inducing, and we repair to our cozy cabin fairly early that evening.

Day 5 — Wednesday, May 20

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! (Seems like heaven for our hunting and tailgating friends in S.C.!) 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, whilst a small group of musicians play traditional music in the back. This is good — this is great! We return to our temporary floating home in the wee hours of night.

Day 6 — Thursday, May 21

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 harbor 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, Glen-gyle 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 so intense as its Islay siblings.

We are lucky; it is the annual festival and Springbank distillery has a special tasting, conducted by their famous ambassador Mark Watt. He opens a rare cask of Glen Mhor from the early 1980s

Clockwise from top right: The *Thalassa* in the harbor of Craighouse; deer on the island of Jura; pipers piping during a festival at Campbeltown.





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 as dedicated as can be.

Day 7 — Friday, May 22

After a restorative night's rest we set sail back to the isle of Arran, since 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 pleas-

Opposite page, clockwise from top left: The Twelve Apostles at Arran Island; the dinghy to Craighouse; Lochranza Harbor at sunset; the sails of the *Thalassa* in the wind.

Below: The *Thalassa* in the harbor of Craighouse.

ant 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 all. 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 into 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 traveled by plane to visit his favorite distillery, Ardbeg. This gentleman is so fierce about that pungent malt that he annually organizes Ardbeggeddon Day, back in the United States. 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 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!

Slainte Mhath,

The Whisky Cruisin' Couple (for one time)

The barquentine *Thalassa* is an imposing and seaworthy sailer. The three-master is one of the most beautiful and fastest sailing vessels 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. Whisky cruises run from May through August; some dates have already sold out.

Make someone's holiday shine extra-bright by booking a whisky cruise at www.tallshipthalassa.nl.

Put a whisky cruise
under the Christmas tree!

