



We don't quote *Anchorman's* Ron Burgundy often (probably not often enough, in fact), but who better to sum up the appeal of a tour of Scotland's distilleries?

By William Spain



A defective latch sent a bag flying off the back of the bus and onto a Scottish motorway, where it was promptly run over by a car. The laptop inside was smashed beyond repair, the screen broken and the electronic guts splattered about. But a rare bottle of 35-year-old Linn House Scotch presented by Chivas Brothers distillers the evening before—and packed just inches from the computer—survived without a scratch. The driver, in his rich Scots burr, commented, “That is why they call it ‘cask strength.’”

The “bag incident” was among the quirkiest highlights of a whisky-soaked, weeklong ramble through the lovely Scottish countryside, along with an apocalyptic canoe trip down a rain-swollen River Spey that spilled a dozen American journalists and their local handlers into near-freezing water. (They were later reinvigorated by repeated applications of Speyburn ten-year-old.)

Our tour began in Aberfeldy, a town that’s smack-dab in the middle of the country and home to Dewar’s World of Whisky, a distillery and visitor center that is second to none in terms of size, depth, and sophistication. There’s no better place to learn the process of making Scotch—and the difference between single malts and blends. Simply put, the former must all come from the same distillery, though not necessarily the same batch, while

the latter can contain liquid from dozens of locations. In both cases, however, the age stamp (i.e., 12-year-old) represents the youngest Scotch in the mix; some of it may be a good deal older.

The Dewar’s-branded blends, the distillery’s best known, run the gamut from workaday White Label to 18-year-old primo to Signature (at up to \$300 a pop), which is based around a 27-year-old. The company also produces a pair of top-notch single malts—Aberfeldy 12- and 21-year-olds. Taste them all.

Scotch whisky boasts an enormous range of tastes, depending on the percentage of malted barley that goes into the mix and how it’s roasted, the water source, proximity to the ocean, and, most important, the wood: Scotch is aged in barrels that have previously held American bourbon or sour mash, or Spanish sherry. At places like Ardmore, which makes an eponymous single malt and the blended Teacher’s, U.S. visitors may do a double take when they see oak casks stamped Maker’s Mark or Jim Beam.

Wood is something of an obsession at one don’t-miss distillery: the Macallan. From their perch high above the Spey on a magnificent estate, the good folks there can talk oak for hours, and one employee is dedicated to hand-making or selecting each and every cask. The wide range of colors, flavors, and aromas that mark the Macallan line are results that speak for themselves.

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There's no better way than a distillery tour to learn about making Scotch and the difference between single malts and blends.

There are no slouches at Royal Lochnagar, either, one of the smaller operations of the multinational liquor behemoth Diageo. The "royal" dates back to a visit by Queen Victoria and family to the distillery, which sits in the shadow of Balmoral Castle, one of the British royal family's favored summering spots. Prince Charles has been known to drop by for a dram, proving that his taste in booze—if not in women—is still relatively refined.

The natural settings of most Scottish distilleries range from quaint to picturesque, but if you're looking for spectacular, try Glenmorangie. The scenery in the Highlands north of Inverness on a peninsula above the Dornoch Firth, an arm of the North Sea,

is almost as breathtaking as the local amber fluid. The distillery has just reopened for tours following construction, and visitors may get a chance to chat with Dr. Bill Lumsden, a biochemist by training who later turned his skills to making some of the world's best whisky. His latest creation is Signet, a single malt made with 20 percent chocolate-malted barley, giving it a rich, complex taste and color that he calls "voluptuous." For a treat, book a room at Glenmorangie House, justifiably famous for its sweeping views down to the sea, its phenomenal cuisine featuring the best local seafood, meat, and produce, and its cabinet of rare Scotches.

Accommodations in Scotland vary from small bed and breakfasts to roadside inns to spectacular castle hotels. The prices may give some Americans serious sticker shock, but the economic downturn gives you more buying power. The food is generally good, though the menus can be somewhat limited compared to the United States. The salmon is always a good bet, as is the beef and venison; the lamb—which you'll see scampering about the meadows in a display of mouth-watering cuteness—is excellent.

The weather can be unpredictable, with rain often in the forecast. The best time to go in terms of weather is the summer, but the prices skyrocket. The more budget-conscious might find late spring or early fall a better bet. ☺