

IN SEARCH OF THE SPEYSIDE SPIRIT

Home to some of Scotland's most beautiful scenery, and more than half of the country's distilleries, this rugged region is renowned for its warming, golden malt whisky



LandScape



WHISKY PRODUCTION AND the remote Scottish landscape go hand in hand. Driving along the winding roads of Speyside – abandoning the bustle of towns, such as Aberlour or Dufftown, and passing the heather-clad Ben Rinnes – leads into striking, sublime hilly terrain. Fir trees grow on the hills, and pheasants surprise visitors, with reckless marches onto the road. In winter, as the snows fall, this region becomes even more beautifully remote. A white blanket covers the land, and temperatures plummet as icicles form, and rivers ice over. Tucked in the shelter, flanked by the stark ruins of Blairfindy Castle, and cradled by the braes and hills of the Cairngorms, is one of Speyside’s most renowned and historic distilleries: The Glenlivet.

‘Glenlivet’ in Gaelic translates as ‘Valley of the Smooth Flowing One’ – no doubt referencing the pure water of the River Livet. While the snow muffles and cocoons this land, and animals slow their pace to reserve energy, in the stills of Glenlivet, the chemistry of distillation continues in the same time-honoured fashion that it has for centuries. The distillery’s rugged remoteness and isolation is a key part of Glenlivet’s history and heritage.

But this is a terrain that can also hide secrets. Early whisky was produced illicitly, due to extortionate taxes introduced by the Government in 1644. Distilled in tucked-away valleys and glens, avoiding the excise men was key, and creating a

pure spirit mattered more than legalities. Hunting down basic stills – that nobody wanted to be found and went to great lengths to conceal – in such a raw landscape seems an unforgiving task, and in winter, in heavy snow, it was a potentially deadly escapade.

Most early whisky producers were like the Glenlivet founder, George Smith; an everyday farmer, growing barley and tending cattle, with a healthy sideline of illegal whisky distilling to bring in additional income. Despite being illicit, whisky had such renown that when King George IV visited Edinburgh in 1822, he drank Glenlivet. To have the monarch openly endorse an illegal distillery, and indirectly an entire industry that the Government had little control over, was simply embarrassing for the London powerbrokers. The Excise Law of 1823 followed, significantly reducing taxes to encourage distillers to come back into the fold and become legal entities. But in a region where lawlessness and evasion had become everyday life, and paying no taxes whatsoever was the norm, this was not going to be an easy conversion.

First legal whisky

When modern visitors leave the crisp, frosty air and step into the notably plush warmth of the Glenlivet Distillery Visitor Centre, they are told the story of how George Smith became the very first Speyside distiller to become licensed; to come in from the cold and produce the region’s first legal whisky,

A view of The Glenlivet, sitting in the wild and remote Livet Valley among snow-capped hills and abundant springs, where the first legal Speyside whisky was distilled.



Tall, lantern, or lamp-glass shaped stills, such as these at The Glenlivet, promote a process called reflux, when vapour meets a cooler surface inside the still, turns back into liquid, falls back down the still and is re-distilled. The more reflux there is, the lighter and more complex the spirit will be.

DEFINITION OF A SCOTCH WHISKY

The Scottish Whisky Association clarifies that “Scotch Whisky must, by law, be distilled and matured in Scotland in oak casks for at least three years and bottled at a minimum alcoholic strength of 40% abv. A single malt Scotch whisky is a Scotch whisky distilled at a single distillery from water and malted barley without the addition of any other cereals, and by batch distillation in copper pot stills. Single malt Scotch whisky must be bottled in Scotland.”

fresh with homegrown barley and the pure water of Josie’s Well. This was not an easy decision, and there were consequences, including threats of both arson and to his life, to the extent that the Laird of Aberlour gave George two pistols to carry about his person at all times. Smith refused to be put off, and other distilleries followed his lead to become accepted, legal entities, and, by 1852, even Charles Dickens wrote of the ‘rare old Glenlivet’ when he recommended a single malt.

When guests stroll past Glenlivet’s huge copper stills; the vast Douglas fir mash tuns; and explore the extensive warehouses where the whisky quietly rests in American or European oak casks, the dedicated tour guide explains the seemingly magical chemistry that occurs within the many vats, tuns and barrels. Visitors are invited to smell different casks to determine whether or not they once housed sherry,

bourbon or wine before having the privileged role of sheltering Glenlivet’s whisky for the required minimum of three years before it can truly be called Scotch whisky. The rich smells of malt abound, and subtle notes of vanilla, cherries and grapes have a festive familiarity to them. Christmas for many is a time for a warming dram in front of the fire or raising a glass to friends near and far on Hogmanay: a coming together for open celebration. There is definitely something in the senses that links the rich, fiery warmth of whisky with a deep, indulgent winter. As the tour guide takes pride in describing the transformative process of barley, water and yeast into the prized ‘uisge beatha’, or ‘water of life’, it is hard to imagine that this process was once a dark underground secret hidden in the wilds of the Cairngorms.

Today, rather than hiding in the shadows, people carve careers in the whisky industry with pride. Nicola Topp is a Chivas Brothers distillery operations technician, following in her grandfather’s footsteps, and one of many women now crafting Scotland’s whisky.

“The whisky industry is becoming more diverse than ever before, so we must be doing something right,” says Nicola. “It’s a fantastic industry to be a part of. The best thing is the wide range of jobs, so there’s something for everyone. I started my journey in the whisky industry when I left school at 18 and joined Chivas Brothers as a tour guide at Aberlour Distillery, conducting tours and tastings for whisky enthusiasts from all over the world.

“After my first season, I enquired about shadowing the operators on shift to learn more about malt whisky production, such as how and why vital processes are carried out, and I went on to my current role when I was 19. My Granda worked in production at Aberlour Distillery.

“Every tour I did, he got a special mention because I was proud of the family connection, and guests loved hearing stories of what working at a still was like back in the 1970s and 1980s.”

“The king o’ drinks, as I conceive it, Talisker, Isla, or Glenlivet!”

Robert Louis Stevenson,
‘The Scotsman’s Return From Abroad’

Nicola Topp, who has followed her grandfather’s footsteps working at The Glenlivet, and is both an expert on the spirit and its production.



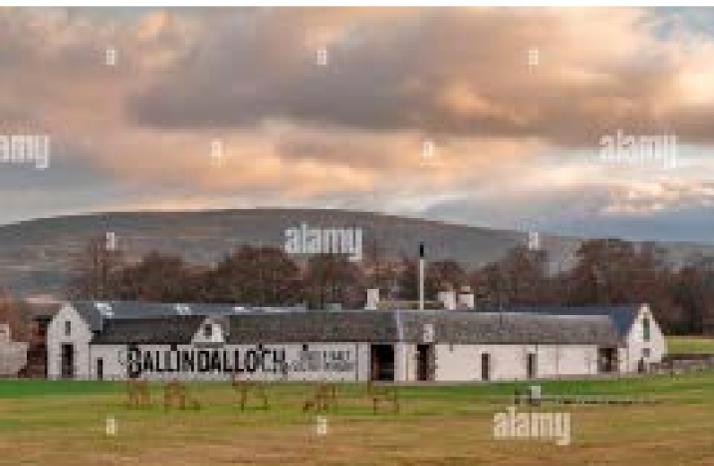
Tormore Distillery, with its distinctive topiary shaped like stills, is historically known as the Pearl of Speyside for its architectural design.

In modern times, distilleries and their stories take pride of place in the Speyside landscape, and the buildings are beautiful in their own right, with traditional pagoda chimneys piercing the sky. Winding away from Glenlivet, it is worth taking time to pass by the attractive Tormore Distillery, which, while not open to the public, can still be admired from the roadside. Built in 1960, this statement property is already a recognised listed building. Dinky whitewashed houses that formerly housed the workforce sit squatly in the snow, flanking the stylish architectural design of Sir Albert Richardson, a former president of the Royal Academy. This ornate, yet functional, building was constructed of granite, with a crisp white frontage. Topiary hedges are shaped like bells or stills, while a small pond gathers ice on its surface. Distilleries are part of the scenery here, and each one adapts to the landscape in a different way.

Single estate distillery

The next stop, Ballindalloch, stands out as a smaller craft whisky producer, still doing virtually everything by hand, on

Porter's Lodge, on Ballindalloch Estate, is an ornate, castle-shaped gatehouse, with turret, ramparts and gun loops (below). The distillery was built from a derelict farm steading (bottom).



a slower time frame to modern distilleries. The family at the helm has a long history of whisky production. The estate, which includes a castle and ornate gardens, is owned by the Macpherson-Grants. Initially, the lands of Ballindalloch and Glencairnie were granted to John Grant of Freuchie by King James IV in 1499. The history of distilling on the Ballindalloch Estate dates back to the early 1820s, when an illicit distillery was run at a site called Delnashaugh – once a former drover's inn. The third baronet, Sir George Macpherson-Grant, became directly involved in whisky production, co-founding Cragganmore distillery in 1869, when such activities were licensed and above board. Today's operation, Ballindalloch Single Malt Distillery, is small, but perfectly formed.

"As the 23rd generation of the Macpherson-Grant family to live at Ballindalloch, it is important to me that the estate continues to thrive, both as a family home and as a sustainable small enterprise," says the current baronet, Guy Macpherson-Grant. "Adding value to our spring barley crop was an obvious way to develop the economic activity of the Home Farm. Given that, here on Speyside, there is the expertise and experience to create delicious Scotch whisky, setting up a distillery here was a straightforward decision."

Establishing the distillery was a family concern. "My brother managed the construction; my mother oversaw the fit-out of the visitor area; and my father the project as a whole. Following in the footsteps of my great-grandfather and great-great-grandfather in the distilling industry is a challenge that I relish. The family's vision for the distillery is a long-term one, adding meaningfully to the turnover of the estate over the coming years."

THE WHISKY-MAKING PROCESS

Whisky begins with three basic ingredients: water, barley and yeast. The first step is malting the barley; soaking it in water to essentially trick the grains into germinating. This releases all the natural sugars and enzymes required to make great whisky. Heat is then applied to dry the barley out and halt the germination process before it progresses too far. This stage is known as kilning; traditionally done under the iconic cupola or pagoda roofs that make distilleries so aesthetically pleasing. If a fuel source such as peat is used in the kilning process, a smoky, peaty flavour can be achieved. Glenlivet receives 530 tons of malted barley each week, which is put through a three-roller Swiss-made Bühler mill to crush it into a coarse flour, called 'grist'.

The grist is placed in a large steel 'mash tun' with hot water to break down the starches into soluble sugars. The leftover barley from this process is referred to as 'draff', and this byproduct is usually fed to cattle. The cooled, drained non-alcoholic liquid that remains is known as 'wort', and this is placed inside wooden washbacks – usually vast vats crafted from Douglas fir. Yeast is added so the fermentation process can begin. At this stage, the mixture is called 'wash': the yeast produces alcohol and

carbon dioxide, with the resulting liquid tasting similar to a light beer.

The wash is placed within copper stills for distillation, heated within to 78.3°C – the boiling point of alcohol – and, because alcohol evaporates before water does, the alcoholic vapours rise up the neck of the still into a condenser, where they cool back into liquid form. The condensed liquid produced from the first distillation is referred to as the 'low wines', referring to its low alcohol content of 20-30 per cent ABV, which is nowhere near that of a single malt, so a second distillation is required. The results of the second distillation are split into three categories: the 'head', or foreshots, that contains unwanted compounds; the sought-after 'heart'; and the heavy, oilier 'tails', or feints. Both the head and the tails are returned to the still to go through the process once more. The middle section – the 'heart' of the run – is the desired output, and the stillman 'makes the cut' – pulling levels to decide when the heads stop, the sought after 'heart' begins and ends, and the tails start. A good spirit is often at approximately the 70 per cent mark.

This spirit is then placed into handcrafted oak casks. It is these casks that influence much of the colour and flavour of the



A taster at a distillery smelling whisky in a glass. Its bulbous bottom allows the spirit to be swirled around, and the narrower top concentrates the aromas.

resulting spirit. It may be stored in European oak casks, American white oak casks, charred casks, or ones that once held bourbon, wine or sherry, and it may be stored for the minimum of three years or for several decades. It might even be moved from cask to cask every few years. Each decision impacts the end result, leading to familiar favourites, new taste sensations, endless experimentation, and a journey by whisky enthusiasts to find the ultimate dram.



Thomas Telford's latticed cast iron Craigellachie Bridge, spanning the Spey, with two sets of mock-medieval crenelated towers standing 15ft (4.5m) high on each side of the river.

The Ballindalloch estate covers 22,000 acres and is notably self-sufficient – described as Scotland's first single estate distillery. It has its own water source for whisky and directly farms and supplies all its own barley, which is remarkably rare. The grains are taken to Inverness for malting before being returned to Speyside. The estate is also globally renowned for its herd of Aberdeen-Angus cattle – safely housed indoors over winter – and these cattle directly link to the whisky too. Once the barley has been utilised in the whisky process, the leftover grains are referred to as 'draff'. Draff is rich in nutrients and has traditionally been passed to farmers to feed to their livestock as an appreciated byproduct of the distilling process.

At Ballindalloch, the estate's own barley creates the whisky and then feeds the cattle, which are descended from the first herd started by Sir George Macpherson-Grant in 1860 and is now said to be the oldest surviving bloodline of Aberdeen-Angus in the world. It is a wonderfully circular process, is environmentally friendly, and uses every scrap of resources, as farmers have done for centuries.

Despite tales of the landed gentry, a grand castle and elegant gardens, the distillery itself is set in a humble farm building. This brought its own challenges, as the steading dates back to 1848 and is a listed building in its own right. To create the distillery, the family had to work within the parameters of what is possible when repurposing a listed building. They committed to using local tradesmen, with the vast majority of the work done by businesses within 25 miles of the site. It opened in 2015, and within the compact space, visitors can see the mash tun; the traditional wooden

washback; and the handsome copper still standing side by side while the sounds of the on-site milling machine whirs in the background. The end result has been a new whisky, released in August 2023, and already sold out.

Whisky before bedtime

Winding away from the Ballindalloch distillery, it is time to take a break. By resting up at one of the region's whisky inns or hotels, the whisky wonderland experience can continue well into the evening. The village of Craigellachie sits at the foot of the snow-topped Ben Aigan, at the confluence of the River Spey and River Fiddich, on the Speyside Way's 65-mile walking and cycling route. It is home to several excellent whisky establishments, including The Highlander Inn, with its cosy local bar: a subterranean, intimate space, with more than 300 whiskies. It also houses one of the largest collection of Japanese whiskies outside Japan, thanks to the dedicated owner, Tatsuya Minagawa. While many of those involved



Whisky aficionado Tatsuya Minagawa followed his dream to run his own hostelry: The Highlander Inn.

Like snow-capped mountains, the curvaceous modern Macallan distillery blends with the peaks of the region.

MODERN AND ECO-FRIENDLY DISTILLERIES

Dalmunach distillery, on the outskirts of the small village of Carron, may not host tours, but visitors can get very close to this modern glass-fronted building. The sweeping floor-to-ceiling glass windows of the Chivas Brothers site reveal the workings and stills inside one of the most energy-efficient distilleries in the world. It stands on the former site of the Imperial Distillery, taken down in 2014 to be reimaged as Dalmunach. Red bricks from Imperial were upcycled to create a feature wall in the entrance, while wood from the original washbacks clads the new distillery walls.

The building design, by international firm NORR, was inspired by the two main whisky ingredients: barley and water. The building is split into three major parallel components that resemble three heads of barley, fronted by a small lake representing the water used in the distilling process. While Dalmunach harks to the past by harnessing the same spring water supply used by the old Imperial Distillery, it looks forward by employing the latest heat recovery technology, and it is said to use approximately 40 per cent less gas and electricity and 15 per cent less water than the industry average. When production can reach 10 million litres per year, such a sustainable approach makes a huge difference.

An eco distillery that does welcome guests is the remarkable Macallan, located just outside the village of Craigellachie. A core part of acclaimed architects Rogers Stirk Harbour + Partners' brief was the requirement to blend the distillery into the landscape, and the space-age building boasts a curvaceous grass-topped roof, made up of 380,000 different components, with undulating 'hillocks' that appear to merge into the surroundings. At 12,000sq m, it is one of



the largest green roofscapes in Europe, providing sustainable food and nesting resources for a host of birds and insects. The building took three and a half years to complete, cost £140 million, and created approximately 60 jobs.

The 485-acre estate is home to 60,000 trees of 27 different species, plus badgers, otters, Pine martens, Red squirrels and pheasants, and some Highland cattle that delight visitors. Wild Atlantic salmon leap in the River Spey, and the distillery has worked with the Atlantic Salmon Trust, the Spey Fishery Board, the Woodland Trust, the North East Scotland Biodiversity Partnership and the Cairngorms National Park Authority on a variety of river and salmon protection, and research projects.

Farming dates back to 1543 on the estate and, today, almost 100 acres are nurtured for barley. Any leftovers from the distillation process are used as agricultural fertiliser, animal feed, and to generate electricity at a local combined heat and power plant. The Macallan Estate has achieved the Green Tourism Gold accreditation.

Lit up to reveal its inner workings, Dalmunach distillery, in Carron, can be seen from the nearby Speyside Way.

"Whisky is liquid sunshine"

George Bernard Shaw



THE MALT WHISKY TRAIL

The Malt Whisky Trail neatly packages eight quality distilleries and the Speyside Cooperage into one digestible road trip, covering Forres, Elgin, Rothes and Keith, then down into Craigellachie, Dufftown and Glenlivet. It combines a mix of global brands with boutique producers.

Highlights include Benromach – a family-owned distillery, where the casks are hand-filled, individually weighed and stencilled by hand before being stowed in traditional dunnage warehouses. For connoisseurs of the peaty west coast whisky flavours, Benromach creates one of the few peatier whiskies on the east. Dallas Dhu distillery is unusual in that it no longer produces whisky at all, and instead is under the stewardship of Historic Environment Scotland, inviting guests to step back in time to see how whisky was made in the 1900s and get close to the old machinery and processes that put Speyside on the map. The Strathisla Distillery, dating back to 1786, is undoubtedly one of the most attractive in the region, with its twin cupola- or pagoda-style chimneys, once used to ventilate the malt kilns back when distilleries malted their own barley on site. Strathisla is a photographer's favourite location whatever the weather. A final highlight is Glenfiddich, offering a vast visitor centre that delights in showing tourists the Glenfiddich way, and 'home to the world's most-awarded single malt'.

The trail also features handy suggestions on where to eat, drink, stay and play.



Set in the heart of Speyside, Dufftown is known as the whisky capital of the world. It is said that while Rome was built on seven hills, Dufftown was built on seven stills.



Snowfalls on Strathisla Distillery in Keith highlight the pagoda-shaped ventilation cupolas.

The large, white distillery buildings at Cardhu, which means Black Rock in Gaelic (right). Laura Sharp with the statue of Elizabeth Cumming waving her warning flag alongside the striding figure of Johnnie Walker (far right).



in the Scottish whisky industry are Scots who can trace their family involvement back generations, Tatsuya demonstrates that love of the liquor matters as much as lineage or where you come from. "As an 18-year-old growing up in Kyoto, Japan, everyone was drinking whisky, including me," he says. "But then I tried a 17-year-old Ballantine whisky, and I thought 'wow', and suddenly things all made sense to me. I moved to Scotland aged 29, working in Edinburgh's whisky bars, and have been involved in whisky ever since." Tatsuya bought The Highlander Inn in 2015, and proudly owns his own corner of Scottish whisky hospitality.

The ladies of Cardhu

A new winter's day brings a new distillery – this time, Cardhu, which stands out due to its strong female leadership. To reach this Speyside gem, it is a case of navigating single-track roads, surrounded by forests and barley fields. Upon arrival, a golden statue of a woman holding a bright red flag, accompanied by a striding man, hints at the tales Cardhu wishes to tell.

Cardhu was initially home to an illicit still, dating back to circa 1813, which was run by tenant farmers, Helen and John Cumming. This remote land of illegal operations may sound like masculine lawless territory, but many farmers' wives were involved in whisky production too. In the Cummings' case, John tended the farm, and Helen distilled 'the water of life' at home. When an excise man visited Helen's farmhouse as she was busily distilling, she is said to have dusted herself in flour, hidden her still, and welcomed the gentleman indoors having claimed to be 'busy with a day's baking'. She continued to welcome and befriend the excise men in this

*"Fortune! if thou'll but gie me still
Hale breeks, a scone, an' whisky gill,
An' rowth o' rhyme to rave at will"*

Robert Burns, 'Scotch Drink'

fashion, even giving them food, drink and somewhere to sleep – meanwhile raising a red flag so all her neighbours knew the excise men were in town and to quickly hide all evidence of whisky production. Female charm, hospitality, and a dash of cunning and brazen cheek won the day.

When Helen's husband, John, passed away, the reins of Cardhu ultimately passed to the couple's daughter-in-law, Elizabeth Cumming, after Helen's son Lewis died in 1872, leaving behind two sons, a pregnant Elizabeth, and a young daughter, who sadly passed away three days after her father.

Elizabeth went on to enlarge the distillery, drastically increase output, and, when the time finally came to sell the business, she protected the name Cardhu, her family's interests, and her workers' jobs, in a deal with Johnnie Walker. To this day, Cardhu represents the spirit of both Helen and Elizabeth Cumming.

"The story of the Cumming family is a key part of our history, and their spirit of innovation and determination are qualities we're proud to celebrate," says Laura Sharp, Cardhu brand home manager. "I love sharing the story of the



Barrels piled high at Speyside Cooperage (above). A cooper working with the casks (right). A cooper can make approximately 30 casks a day (far right).



women who have come before me and my colleagues. It's one of the most inspirational stories in Scotch whisky, and I'm proud to be a part of that legacy."

Crafting barrels

A final stop on this trip is the unmissable Speyside Cooperage, where sherry, wine and bourbon casks are remastered by hand to create the barrels within which the whisky will mature. This is a place of wood and sweat, and it is without doubt one of the noisiest and most traditional stops en route. The cooperage tour is conducted at various points along a viewing gallery, looking down on men crashing, thudding and hammering metal and wood into shape. This is highly skilled, pure physical activity, with the men taking pride in a drive to craft barrels as quickly and efficiently as possible. *The Guinness Book of Records* notes the fastest time to build a 190-litre barrel is held here, with 3

minutes, 3.18 seconds achieved by cooper David McKenzie on 29 April 2017.

The hand-crafted casks go on to lovingly cradle Speyside's whisky, in deep, dark warehouses dotted across Morayshire and into the Highlands. Angels are said to take a share of this treasured liquor, as two per cent mysteriously evaporates from each cask every year. There is something notably festive about the thought of angels indulging in their share of Scotland's finest whisky.

This year, as we raise a glass to celebrate Christmas or bring in the new year, perhaps we should remember the people, places, processes and the provenance that bring each golden drop to the lips. ■

• Words: Janice Hopper

IMPORTANT INFORMATION FOR DRIVERS AND OTHER VISITORS

It is always recommended avoiding alcohol completely for anyone who has to drive, and to adhere to Scottish alcohol laws.

Many of the distilleries offer 'driver's drams' to take away – either free of charge or for a few pounds – to enjoy once the day's driving is over.

Booking ahead is often necessary for distillery tours, so it is advisable to do this to avoid disappointment on the day. Due to the fact that whisky is being produced on-site, many distilleries have age restrictions, so if travelling with anyone under the age of 18 it is worth checking ahead to ensure they will be welcome.



Photography: Alamy; Mike Wilkinson/Cardhu; Shutterstock