

founded in 1881 and has a reputation for a milder, sweeter whisky than some of the more pungent and peaty single malts on the southern shore. Leaving our kayaks on the beach, we ate a quick lunch and joined a tour with mash man Andrew Brown.

All Scotch whisky, Brown explained, begins with malted barley. The dried malt is milled and placed in a huge vat, or mash tun, with heated springwater. This mashing process extracts the sugars from the malt “and creates a clear, fermentable liquid called wort, which is drained into wash backs. At Bunnahabhain, the wash backs are enormous wooden vats made of Douglas fir. Within these vats yeast is added and the wort ferments into a distillable fluid, part water and part alcohol, called the wash. Brown opened a hatch into one of these vats and let us take a careful sniff: The fumes were eye-watering. The wash then travels to a set of stills—huge, pear-shaped copper devices that look like they came out of the engine room of the *Nautilus* in *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. The first distillation results in a liquid—usually about 21 percent alcohol—called low wines. This is distilled a second time, then shunted into a brass, glass-fronted case called the spirit safe. The first and final parts of a run (called the foreshots and the feints, respectively) are too unrefined to be put into casks, so a stillman diverts them back for yet another

portion of the liquid evaporates, this lost whisky has long been known as the angels’ share. “It takes three years and three days to make whisky,” said Brown. “Three days to go from the mash to the cask, and three years from the cask to the bottle.”

After the tour, we gathered with Brown in the small shop and sipped his handiwork. The 12-year-old was smooth, mild, faintly sweet, and nutty. For generations, Brown said, all employees of the distillery received a dram of whisky first thing in the morning, a dram at lunch, and a dram at closing time. A dram in this context was not a token sip, but a quarter-pint of whisky, or four shots. This policy was finally discontinued in 1982. “I knew one man who worked for Bunnahabhain for 30 years,” said Brown with only half a smile, “and he couldn’t remember the first 15 of ’em.”

Later that afternoon Dave Protherough, the chairman of the Islay Kayaking Club, met us at Bunnahabhain. He had agreed to shuttle us to Islay’s south shore, which has a number of paddle-up distilleries. We loaded our boats onto his trailer and motored south into the island’s interior. Islay is often called the Queen of the Hebrides, a rolling Scottish counterpart to Martha’s Vineyard in its balance of sea views, woods, farmland, and pasture. I asked Protherough if there were any historical sites on our route across Islay. It was like asking if there were any famous battlefields near Waterloo. Protherough hit the brakes sharply and



turned onto a narrow lane. “Sure,” he said. “This will take us to Finlaggan, the seat of the Lord of the Isles.”

Finlaggan was the center of power for the self-declared Lords of the Isles, naval warlords of mixed Norse and Gaelic descent who ruled the western islands in the 14th and 15th centuries. At their height, the Lords exerted their influence deep into western Scotland and were on a political par with the kings of Scotland and England. Trundling over the moors, we soon arrived at a small inland loch with two small islands in its center. To the west, beyond the loch, lay woodland. We crossed a wooden footbridge from the shore and explored the stone ruins on the larger of the two islands, a cluster of low stone walls, medieval carvings, and a roofless chapel. The surviving ruins of Finlaggan are few, but the setting is deeply evocative, and for historians there are few sites in the Hebrides of more significance.

Continuing on from Finlaggan, we reached the south side of Islay by dusk and checked in to a small waterfront hotel in the town of Bruichladdich called An Taigh-Osda. Elegant and spotless, more contemporary than historic with its plain-hewn white facade, the hotel overlooks a broad bay in sight of two other distilleries. Proprietor Paul Graham joined us for drinks in the sitting room and poured me a locally brewed peat-flavored ale before a dinner of spring rolls made with local crab and langoustine, followed by a seafood platter with half a lobster, mussels, crab, oysters, scallops, smoked salmon, and baby clams. On my last trip to Scotland, my companions had delighted in haggis for breakfast and fish and chips for dinner, and it seemed the only fresh food eaten in the country was the parsley garnish atop a shepherd’s pie. Not so in the Hebrides. Food is taken as a point of distinction among islanders. Judging from the fare alone, we might have been on the coast of France.

THE NEXT DAY after a slow morning ashore, we entered the water in the town harbor of Port Ellen, in the middle of Islay’s southern coast. Our first goal was the Laphroaig distillery, about two miles to the east. This coast was softer, less barren, and far more inhabited than the western side of Jura; beyond rocky

[ADVENTURE GUIDE]

Whisky BY BOAT

Of the many things that define Scotland’s Inner Hebrides—world-class single malt distilleries, abandoned castles, and uninhabited coasts—there is now one more: paddle-up whisky tours. Here’s how to plan one of the most unusual sea kayaking trips on the planet.



GETTING THERE

There is only one outfitter that arranges distillery-to-distillery kayak tours: Tony Hammock’s Sea Freedom Kayak (seafreedomkayak.co.uk). To retrace the author’s route from mainland Scotland to Jura to Islay, you’ll need a week (\$700; food, lodging, and tours not included). Modest paddlers



should stick to Islay’s southern coast, where the kayaking is easier, the inns comfortable, and the distilleries plentiful. Experienced boaters should consider a kayaking-and-camping combo along Jura’s wild and sparsely populated coast.

LODGING

Strumhor, Tony Hammock’s B&B on the mainland coast

near the Oban distillery, is the place to begin and end an Inner Hebrides kayaking trip ([doubles from \\$78; strumhor.co.uk](http://doublesfrom.com)). An Taigh-Osda is a modern B&B on Islay’s south shore that sits within striking distance of the island’s best known distilleries ([doubles from \\$162; antaighosda.co.uk](http://doublesfrom.com)). As Jura’s only hotel, the 17-bedroom Jura Hotel captures the island’s rugged spirit ([doubles from \\$110; jurahotel.co.uk](http://doublesfrom.com)).

SPIRITS

Southern Islay has the highest concentration of distilleries in the Inner Hebrides. Stronger and peatier than their northern counterparts, Laphroaig (laphroaig.com), Lagavulin (malts.com), and Ardbeg (ardbeg.com) are the most acclaimed Islay spirits. The distilleries welcome visits. In the north, Bunnahabhain (bunnahabhain.com), which produces a sweeter, milder whisky, conducts tours as well. —MEGAN PARKS