



Whisky galore:  
Lagavulin distillery

## Dram busters

With seven world-renowned whiskies produced in a ten-mile radius, it's easy to drink in the real beauty of Islay

"Yeah, I have a favourite whisky," says James Brown, farmer, bagpiper, lighthouse keeper, reserve policeman and, for all I know it, Gaelic godfather of soul. "It's called Laphroaig-Lagavulin-Bowmore-Bruichladdich-Ardbeg-Bunnahabhainn-Caol Ila."

James is standing in the bar of Islay's Port Charlotte Hotel reliving the excesses of the night before. He is still a little thick-headed and glassy-eyed, but is happily working his way again through the island's seven world-renowned single malt whiskies. "This one – Lagavulin – is so thick you can almost chew it," he says, smiling, his face once more becoming rosy with alcohol.

Sometimes there is little else to do on Islay (pronounced "Eye-la") other than sit in a snug and drink. This part of Hebridean Scotland receives as much as 50 inches of rain a year. During the late-autumn weekend when I visited, the wind scurried in off the lochs, and the rain, when not horizontal, turned itself off and on like a tap. It was cold and forbidding and there was nothing for it except to work my way round the island by taste.

Peat is the distinctive flavour of Islay's monumentally good malts – it gives the smooth, amber whiskies complex and smoky subtleties – and its presence on the island is hard to miss. From the tiny airport where Prince Charles overshot the runway while piloting an RAF jet in 1994 – causing £1.5 million of damage – the road crosses the Duich

Moss bog with its drying stacks of peat which end up not just in the distilleries but in almost every fireplace on the island.

Islay is a place of oblique, blustery charms that, unlike many of the Western Isles, remains largely unvisited. It doesn't have quite the crowd-pleasing grandeur of Skye or the easy accessibility of Mull, but seems all the better for it. Islay is a warm-hearted if introverted sort of place, an island that seems uncomfortable advertising its attractions. It was once called "The Queen of the Hebrides". It is a connoisseur's British isle.

For all its climatic harshness, there is often a softness to the rain and a brilliance to the light which breaks through the slate-grey clouds and bleaches out the horizon. And, while Islay is no more than 25 miles long by 20 miles across, it is the diversity of landscape that amazes. Various Hebridean islands are justly famous for their long stretches of empty Atlantic beaches, fiercely indented sea lochs, jagged hills and coastlines, and their sheltered woodlands and fields. Islay, however, seems to have it all, making it popular with walkers, cyclists, off-road drivers, nature lovers and bird-watchers.

While there are many settlements to choose from for a short stay, Port Charlotte is one of the more picturesque. It has rows of neat and imposingly solid whitewashed cottages, a small yet pretty harbour and views across Loch Indaal to Bowmore, the island's

### Fact file

GQ flew to Islay from Glasgow with British Airways (0345 222111); return fares from London start at £76. The island can also be reached by CalMac ferry (01880 730253) from Kennacraig on the Argyll mainland; the journey takes two hours and costs from £12.20 for foot passengers, from £63 for a car each way. ScotRail's relaunched 'Caledonian Sleeper' service to Glasgow from London Euston costs from £29 to £135 return, plus £27 for a berth; call 0345 550033 for details. Sleepers are also available to Edinburgh, Aberdeen, Inverness and Fort William. GQ stayed at The Port Charlotte Hotel (01496 850360); double rooms cost from £74 per night, including breakfast. Car hire is available from MacKenzie Rental (01496 302300). The Islay Festival, featuring pipe bands, Gaelic folk groups, ceilidhs and whisky-tasting, runs May 23-31. Call the Islay Tourist Office (01496 810254) for further information.



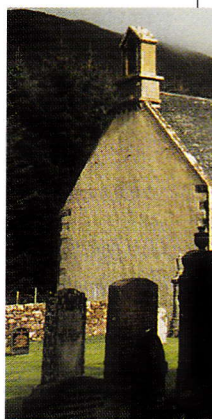


main town, and out to the powerfully dramatic mountains on the nearby island of Jura. The village also has a rambling and fascinating Museum Of Islay Life, which has displays on anything from early Christian settlers to illegal 18th-century distillers and the shipwrecks that make the coastline so popular with divers.

It also has perhaps the island's best hotel. The strategically perched Port Charlotte Hotel, which overlooks the harbour and a small strand of beach, lay derelict until 1995, when the original Victorian building was extensively upgraded and modernised. It now has ten bedrooms and a fine restaurant serving a small but carefully chosen selection of seafood, salmon and beef.

However you make them – by foot, bike or car – there are two contrasting Islay journeys that are unmissable. In the south, past slumbering Port Ellen and the Lagavulin and Laphroaig distilleries (tours are available, with tastings), is a dead-end single-track road skirting the eastern coastline. Along here, you'll pass the splendidly ruined Dunyvaig Castle and medieval Kildalton Chapel with its eighth-century Celtic cross. The low-lying scenery seems temperate and fertile, the hidden beaches and islets calm and almost sub-tropical.

Somewhat different, if more typical, is the road north from Port Askaig down to two more of Islay's distilleries – the wonderfully named Bunnahabhainn (Boo-na-ha-ven) and, my malt of choice, Caol Ila (Col-ee-la) – a track high and sweeping and buffeted by strong winds. Looking out from the roadside across the narrow Sound of Islay to the isolated farms and crofts that hug the foothills of the barren Jura mountains is enough to give any city boy an overriding, if faintly pleasurable, sense of agoraphobia. **PW**



**Peace on earth:**  
from top,  
Machir Bay,  
Islay; Applecross  
Church

