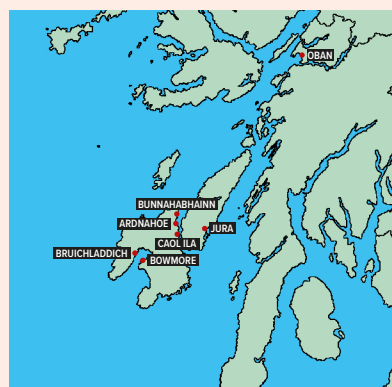


Scotland | Guided by an expert in flavour perception, this Hebridean voyage goes deep into the science of Scotch. By *Tim Moore*

Now take your clips off and tell me what happens." There are 22 of us huddled in the Flying Dutchman's dim, gently swaying saloon, the harbour lights of Oban winking through our starboard portholes, medical clamps fixed to every nose but Professor Barry Smith's. A honed appreciation of single-malt whisky will have to wait: with nostrils liberated, we crunch down on our previously insipid jelly beans and unleash a flood of gaudy flavours.

For Smith, whisky connoisseur and founding director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses at the University of London, this introductory experiment lays bare those unexpected overlaps in the



human palate, demonstrating how taste is really all about smell. Over the coming days, he will nobly endeavour to hotwire and fine-tune our sensory perceptions, even as they are assaulted by regular overloads of extremely strong brown alcohol and the deleterious influence of tackling volatile seas aboard an ageing tall ship.

Our inaugural guided tasting begins with a 14-year-old Oban ("heather and orange peel on the nose – a bit jangly") and ends, two hours later, with a double dose of Glenfarclas ("more harmonious, finer, a little retroussé"). "If you still can't sleep," says Smith, bidding us to bed, "listen to the shipping forecast." Aries Groenveld, our young Dutch skipper, smiles broadly through his beard: "You definitely won't sleep after that."

A brewing storm that promises force 9 gusts and six-metre waves has obliged him to completely reroute our distillery-focused voyage around the Inner Hebrides, yet Groenveld warns – with seasoned understatement – that we will still find it "pretty fresh". "These are challenging waters in any conditions," he says, happily. "Plenty of areas that the Royal Navy still class as un-navigable."

For a tall ship, the Flying Dutchman is rather a small ship. The two-masted, 40-metre vessel started life in 1903 as a Dutch fishing boat, evolving 18 years ago into a cosy 12-cabined passenger carrier. My bunk-bedded quarters, tight up near the bow, are especially bijou. I share them with a retired newspaper lawyer who, by sheer force of proximity, becomes a friend. The cabin floor isn't big enough for four feet: if one of us is out of our bunk, the other is confined to his.

My splendid journey up to Oban from London on the Caledonian Sleeper was, it transpires, more than just the fulfilment of a long-held wish: the experience delivered invaluable acclimatisation to capsule living in an unsteady environment. After my train-based shower/toilet combo, our cabin's tiny all-in-one en suite held no surprises. I'd even sneaked in some vital preparatory research courtesy of the Caledonian Sleeper's extensive single-malt list.

Sailing south-west out of Oban the next morning, any cask-strength cobwebs are swiftly blown clean away. Groenveld hoists a forward sail to stabilise the Flying Dutchman as an eye-streaming wind picks up and the deck begins to tilt and roll. Waves of fog and heavy rain smear out the view; silhouettes of low-slung islands ghost by like mist-bound battleships. I join whey-faced refugees in the wood-panelled saloon and try to fix my eyes on the horizon, which won't keep still and regularly disappears. Ropes whip against the mast with an echoing crack. Ball-bearing raindrops clatter the windows. My anti-nausea medication draws me into uneasy slumber.

I come round in a different world: bright white lighthouses on bright green headlands, double rainbows spanning a jaunty blue sea dotted with ferries and trawlers. As the sun goes down, we pass beneath the strange but imperious trio of smooth grey bell-jar mountains that stand guard over Jura, promoted from last stop to first under our redrafted



# A tasting tour by tall ship

itinerary. "Extremely unget-at-able" was how George Orwell described the island where he wrote most of 1984, and even today, getting here is a two-ferry job that deters casual visitors.

Boggy, barren and beige, Jura has only 200 inhabitants, most occupying the whitewashed, slate-roofed cottages that line the darkening shore at Craighouse, its only significant settlement. On the far left stands the island's only significant employer, its name writ large in black capitals on a white wall: Jura Distillery.

There are no free berths at the Craighouse jetty, so Groenveld drops anchor in the mercifully calm bay. Our evening routine is already established: a hearty meal magicked together by Sian Dickson, our Mull-based cook, dispatched with gusto in the companionable, pub-like saloon and then cleared away with co-operative good cheer. Everyone pitches in with a bit of light washing-up; with nowhere to hide, pitching out isn't really an option. Then it's Barry Hour: our nightly session with the professor and his clinking stash of high-end firewater.

Smith, who is a frequent broadcaster (appearing on the BBC's MasterChef and The Kitchen Cabinet), makes an engaging mentor, at ease both with blithering whisky-dunces like me and the Scotchophile doctors and chemists who dominate a tour that's been organised in partnership with New Scientist magazine. This evening's party piece is a bowl of wasabi nuts. "That whisky burn can really shout down the 600 or so volatile molecules that give a Scotch its flavour, and it's caused by your trigeminal nerve being irritated.



Clockwise from top: the Flying Dutchman at anchor off Bunnahabhain Distillery, Islay; a dram at the Caol Ila distillery on Islay; viewing the copper stills at the Jura Distillery; Jura at the end of the rainbow; tasting the whisky in Bruichladdich's maturation warehouse; Professor Barry Smith, founding director of the Centre for the Study of the Senses at the University of London.

All photographs by Adrian van der Lec.

Having a bit of wasabi first defuses that burn – your brain has already processed it, so when you sip the whisky you get the whole portrait."

The professor is dangerously correct. Once the chief physiological deterrent to necking overproof spirit is neutered, we set about the evening's sample drams with reckless gusto, stumbling gaily across the four quadrants of whisky's flavour wheel: richness, lightness, dry fruit, fresh fruit. The volatility of our own tasting notes, and their poetry, rises conspicuously as the night progresses. "Honeysuckle and green figs!" blurts a Canadian doctor. "Sucking a pebble on the beach!" my cabinmate declares, in eureka tones. I'm just about sorting out smoke from peat, but my own flavour wheel is still very wobbly, and some of the references echoing about the saloon are entirely baffling. Do irises even smell? Does iodine?

In the morning, the Flying Dutchman's rib dinghy ferries us in groups to the distillery's jetty. The staff don't get many drop-ins, so our tour is a pleasingly impromptu wander through pebbledashed plant rooms filled with heat, noise and home-brew odours. The initial phases of whisky production involve mixing industrial quantities of loch water and barley – 26 tons of the latter every week at Jura, delivered by lorries off the ferry – then fermenting it to an 8 per cent "small beer" in giant cylinders. When the magic happens, it does so in a suitably dramatic environment.

The distillation hall at Jura, as with every other we visit, is like some steampunk super-lab: vast, bulbous copper stills with extruded condenser arms that taper up to the lofty rafters, their precious output fed back down into polished brass "spirit safes" with glazed inspection chambers. Our party falls into a reverent silence. For those who worship whisky, this is a cathedral.

We take communion in a sepulchral warehouse stacked floor to distant ceiling with dusty casks. Our guide lowers a valinch – in effect a huge pipette – through a barrel's bung-hole and draws forth a column of golden liquid. "I hope you've all had a good breakfast," she says, neatly dispensing the first generous measure, "because this is proper cask strength." We've all taken full advantage of Dickson's bounteous morning buffet, but it's no match for 57 per cent alcohol. I'm coughing even before the guide tells us the stuff we're drinking fetches £700 a bottle.

In the afternoon we set sail, or at least start engine: unhelpful winds mean I sadly won't be seeing canvas hoisted in anger for the rest of my trip. Islay is right next door but a world away, green and plumply fecund, full of people, life and distilleries. We drop anchor in front of one of the most esteemed, Bunnahabhain, the name once again



After a hearty meal it's our nightly session with the professor and his clinking stash of high-end firewater.

writ large on the seawall. Ahead lie more shore runs in the dinghy, more post-breakfast drams and light-headed tours at three distilleries, more tasting tips.

At Bunnahabhain I am taught to sniff a whisky from the far side of the glass, thereby muting the otherwise dominant alcohol aroma; at Bowmore, the second oldest Scotch distillery on earth, I learn the importance of adding a few drops of water to break the surface tension and liberate those all-important volatile molecules; at Ardnahoe, a distillery so new its whisky is not yet old enough to sell, I redouble this liberation by warming the glass in my hands and keeping my mouth open while I sniff the contents. (I also hear myself saying "a lot of peat on the nose".)

Along the way I come to learn that no matter what the blurb on the bottle might say, the loch water, the spring barley, the Hebridean sea air and all the rest of it have at best a token influence on the end-product. Beyond the smokiness that so many whisky drinkers seek out – largely imparted by malting barley in a peat-fired kiln – the clear, 70 per cent distillate that is whisky's virgin state tastes similar wherever it comes from, with micro-idiosyncrasies that only an industry expert could detect. The alchemy takes place in the barrels, in super-slow-motion. From colour to taste, a whisky is almost

entirely defined by what sort of cask it's been stored in, and for how long. It's all about the wood.

This fundamental is hammered home on my last evening, when the Flying Dutchman is visited by Georgie Crawford. Smith introduces her as "the doyenne of the whisky industry", an Islay-born authority on the production and appreciation of Scotch, currently setting up a major new distillery on the island from scratch. The highlight of Crawford's compelling address, complemented with another battery of drams, is a side-by-side tasting of two whiskies made from identical "base liquid", with one aged in an ex-bourbon cask and the other in a sherry barrel. Seven years on, the sensory distinctions are profound: it's chalk and cheese, if chalk tasted of vanilla and tropical fruit, and cheese of dates and Christmas pudding.

Whisky's decisive element is a matter of hard biochemical fact, yet many of our onboard empiricists look a little crestfallen, reluctant to cast aside the romantic origin myths that have clearly drawn some of them here. "But what about the heather in the peat?" asks a doctor from Cincinnati, in plaintive tones. "What about the Hebridean terroir?"

Looking back at the Flying Dutchman for the last time, an ageless vision of portholes and lofty rigging out on the lonely waters of Bunnahabhain Bay, I understand what makes this adventure click. Old boats and old whisky are all about traditional skills and seasoned wood, arcane worlds lived out before bygone backdrops, ruled by gifted obsessives who speak in ancient riddles. I have seen distillers draffing out, and sailors twisting the yard, and I have learnt their ways.

Well, some of them. On the sleeper back to London, I raise a 12-year-old Glen Garioch to my freshly educated nostrils. "Toffee apples on a crisp day," say the tasting notes in the menu, but my nose isn't listening. "Whisky," it says. I warm the glass in my hands, tip in a capful of mineral water and sniff it from the other side. "OK, unpeated whisky." As I'm jiggled to slumber in another snug little walk-in wardrobe, I take comfort in Barry Smith's sotto voce confession. "I shouldn't say this," he'd murmured one night in the saloon, "but I have a very hard time with any whisky trying to let it not smell like sawdust and raisins."

## DETAILS

Tim Moore was a guest of New Scientist Tours ([newsscientist.com/tours](http://newsscientist.com/tours)), Kraken Travel ([kraken.travel](http://kraken.travel)) and the Caledonian Sleeper ([sleeper.scot](http://sleeper.scot)). The seven-night trip costs from £2,399 per person, with departures planned for September 10 and 23, 2023. Private berths on the Caledonian Sleeper from London to Oban (changing at Crianlarich onto a regular service for the final 42 miles) cost from £175 one-way

