

Transcript

Wild for Scotland Podcast

Season 1, Episode 8: 'An acquired taste' - Isle of Islay

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Hello there and welcome to Wild for Scotland, a podcast that allows you to travel to Scotland through stories. My name is Kathi Kamleitner, I'm a writer and storyteller And I run the Scotland travel blog Watch Me See. After years of helping people from around the world plan their trips, this podcast is my way to help you connect with Scotland regardless of your travel plans. Each episode starts with a travel story about a location or an experience from my travels. Then I'll tell you some of my top tips for visiting to inspire a future trip.

Are you ready?

Great, let's travel to Scotland.

The first season of Wild for Scotland is all about the Scottish isles. Each week, we travel to a different island and spend some time exploring their nooks and crannies, history and landscapes.

This week you might want to pour yourself a dram. We're about to head into Whisky Month, a month-long celebration of all things Scottish whisky. May 16 is World Whisky Day and many whisky regions are hosting festivals and special events to celebrate. This year, most of these will of course happen virtually.

To prepare you for the occasion, we're heading to the Isle of Islay, the Queen of the Hebrides. Once part of the Gaelic kingdom Dál Riata, later centre of the Clan Donald's Lordship of the Isles, the island is now famous for mostly one thing: whisky.

And while I would love to tell you about Islay's stunning beaches, historic sites like Finlaggan or Dunyvaig Castle, or the intricate stone carvings on the Celtic Kildalton Cross - there was really no debate over the focus of this Islay episode.

Whisky is everywhere you look on Islay. From the distilleries, to crafts made from old whisky barrels on sale in the local shops. Recipes refined with a shot of your favourite dram and a glass cabinet full of prized collections in every hotel or bed and breakfast.

The islanders fully embrace whisky as their gift to the world. For me, the journey was a little bumpier, but I'm getting ahead of myself.

Let's travel to Islay together -

This is "An Acquired Taste".

I remember the first time I tried Scottish whisky. I was working in a small bar in Vienna and we had three different single malts to choose from: 16-year old Lagavulin, a smokey whisky from Islay, 14-year old Oban which is a smooth malt with a hint of peat and 10-year old Glenmorangie, a mellow unpeated whisky. Quite the variety for a small bar in Austria.

They were popular among some of our regulars, but I -

I found them awful. The smell, the taste, the burn, everything.

Once I even mixed cola with a shot of Lagavulin that someone had bought for me because it was the only way I could get it down. I'm not proud of it, but it happened.

For me, whisky, like so many other things in life, is an acquired taste.

Who would have thought that a few years later, I would move to Scotland, the homeland of single malt. I knew I had to find a way to like whisky.

And so, I went to distilleries. I learnt about the craft of whisky making. The skill and precision required of the still master or the master blender. The different whisky regions. The impact of the location when it came to storing barrels. The angel's share - that elusive amount that evaporates to the heavens during maturation. I found it absolutely fascinating, but whisky itself still tasted awful to me.

'You've just not found the right whisky for you', they kept saying. The Scots. Blinded by their love for whisky. Maybe I was just not made for it.

But I didn't give up and kept trying. Whisky from the Highlands and lowland distilleries, from the Speyside and Campbeltown, from Islay and the other islands.

Dram by dram, I made myself recognise the differences. Is it peated or unpeated? Can you taste the salt from the seaside? Was this aged in a bourbon or a sherry cask?

With every trip to the distilleries I learnt more about whisky. I even followed the advice of our tour guide at Loch Ness and had a dram on the boat touring the loch - apparently it increases your chances of seeing the monster. But that's a story for another time.

After 4 years of trying, I could finally say, I started not hating it.

For me, whisky is an acquired taste.

Eventually, I went from not hating it, to quite liking a wee dram, not the whole measure though. That was too much.

Many trips to the pub and family gatherings later, I started picking favourites. Oban, yes, I quite like that - a little smokey, but not like licking an ashtray - that's nice. Jura, hmm, yeah, that's good too!

I started filling my hip flask for every long-distance hike I did. Warmth in a bottle, that would keep me cosy at night in my tent. I took a wee sip here and there, then some more, and before you know it, I found myself on the Speyside Way, hiking along the whisky trail. Want to try a cask-strength Aberlour? Sure, bring it over!

It was soon after this that an opportunity fell into my lap - would I like to join a whisky tour to the Isle of Islay?

Without hesitation, I signed up.

By this point, I had started to embrace the peaty Islay whiskies. My days of pouring cola in a Lagavulin were long gone and Laphroaig - one of the smokiest whiskies - was among my favourites. The peatier the better.

I packed my bags and set sail to Islay. And this is where the story really begins.

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[ferry sounds]

I'm standing outside a large white building right next to the sea. There is a slipway leading into the water and a picnic bench with a view of the bay. The sun is shining and tiny dots of light are dancing up and down on the gently swaying water. It was a hazy morning, but as it climbed higher, the sun broke through the clouds.

There are giant letters painted on the side of the building, their deep black colour a stark contrast to the blindingly white paint on the wall. A-R-D-B-E-G. Ardbeg. One of nine whisky distilleries on Islay. Together they produce around 2 million litres of whisky each year. For an island with just over 3,000 inhabitants, that's an awful lot of whisky. Of course, much of it is exported around the world, used in famous blends or enjoyed as single malts neat or on ice.

And yet here I am. At the source. Where it all begins.

Our distillery guide tells us the history of the Ardbeg. It was founded in 1815 - notably a few years before the Excise Act was passed and distilleries started to receive their official licenses. Soon Ardbeg was well known for its blended whisky. Single malt wasn't really a thing in those days. By the 1980s though, the distillery along with the whisky industry as a whole, faced some challenges and production at Ardbeg was actually halted twice, before returning to stability. Today, Ardbeg is owned by a French company, but the whisky production is still well in local hands and demand has only increased. Next to the existing buildings there is a construction site - a new still house with two new copper stills will be added here soon.

But despite these new additions and expansions, Ardbeg, like most distilleries, is dedicated to preserving the heritage of whisky making - a craft that has been refined over hundreds of years. Even though machines have taken over some of the heavy lifting, whisky is still very much an art that depends on the knowledge and skill of still masters and their teams.

Out here by the water, this sense of pride for the heritage of whisky on Islay is particularly clear. Today, most of the transport is done by trucks and big ferries, but back in the day, it was essential to build these island distilleries close to the sea. They relied on boats bringing in the barley needed for production and take away the spirit to be sold around the world. Slipways like the one I'm standing on right now, were the lifelines for these distilleries and the perfect setting for my introduction to the whisky industry on Islay.

Our tour continues - tasting the difference between unmalted barley and the heavily peated barley used here at Ardbeg. Past the mash tuns and wash backs for a whiff of fermentation. And finally to the impressive still house with its giant copper stills.

And like every good distillery tour, we finish off with a dram. Not just one, but three different expressions produced here at the distillery. Surrounded by bottles and with a scent of peat in the air, I hold out my glass. Our guide fills it and talks us through the tasting notes - she's pregnant, but knows them by heart - I can tell that she's tasted it many times before. I go through the tasting step by step. Look at the colour. Swirl the liquid round the glass. Smell it. Take a sip, keep it in my mouth for a wee moment. And swallow. Before I know it, she comes round again and fills my glass for a second time. I repeat the process, a little speedier than the first time. And then she comes round with the third dram. Ok then, I wouldn't want to be rude.

It's barely noon on my first day on Islay, and I'm already three whiskies in. When I finally get up to leave the tasting room for the cafe across the courtyard, my legs are like jelly and I'm feeling light-headed. Thankfully, I had a big breakfast this morning.

After a bite to eat, we continue our journey on the Islay Whisky Coast, a section of coastline dotted by three famous distilleries. Ardbeg, is the one furthest away. Next up is Lagavulin, then Laphroaig.

They are connected by a path that can be cycled or walked. It's only 4 miles from one end to the other - a perfect alternative if no one wants to be the designated driver. We stop for a tasting at Lagavulin and a condensed tour at Laphroaig, followed by more tasting. I must be at least 8 drams in by now and judging by the merry atmosphere on board our little tour bus, everyone is having the time of their lives.

Increasingly inebriated, we make a pit stop at Islay Wines in Port Ellen to taste some wine made from barley, rhubarb and brambles. And I don't know if it's really the wine or if the whisky is getting the better of me - I decide to buy a bottle of barley wine, and save it for a family visit in a few months time.

Before we head back to our accommodation in Bowmore, our driver takes us to the Mull of Oa, a rugged cliff top, leading to the American Monument, a memorial to the men who lost their lives in two shipwrecks off Islay in 1918. The fresh air is like a much-needed splash of cold water in the face. I watch lambs tumble over each other as they joyfully jump across the meadows. Wild goats are grazing closely to the edge of the cliffs, seemingly unaware of the drop to the sea. Far back on the horizon, I can see the coast of Northern Ireland, only 24

miles away. The water below us is crystal clear and I can see the sand and rocks beneath the surface.

With the sun in my face, I take a deep breath. Whisky or not, this is heaven.

I rise the next morning with a sore head. Eight or so whiskies, wine and more wine over dinner in Bowmore do not leave me unscathed. The breakfast is delightful though - a freshly cooked meal, a large pot of coffee and a refreshing glass of orange juice. Just what the doctor ordered. I don't know it yet, but our driver guide has big plans for the day.

First stop: Bowmore Distillery, the oldest distillery on Islay and the one with the oldest warehouses still in use anywhere in Scotland. The tour includes the usual - a walkthrough of the distilling process, the still house and of course a tasting - but we also get to peek inside one of the historic warehouses - often the best-guarded secrets of a whisky distillery. Many store the majority of their whisky in unmarked warehouses in secret locations.

Even though all distilleries on Islay make whisky the old-fashioned way, not all of them are as traditional and quaint as Ardbeg or Laphroaig. Some distilleries were built for large production volumes, never meant to welcome visitors. But of course, people want to see where the magic happens, and so they are finding ways to make this possible. Caol Ila, is one such distillery. Located on the north coast of Islay, its tall stillhouse looks rather industrial. On the inside though, especially by the big copper stills, this distillery is possibly one of Islay's most scenic. Large glass panels make up the majority of the wall facing the sea. I can see the Paps of Jura across the water, those rounded hills on the Isle of Jura. We make our way to a tasting room overlooking the water and indulge in some whisky paired with chocolate. The headache from this morning is long gone and my mood is getting better and better.

After flying visits at Bunnahabhain and Ardnahoe, the newest distillery on the island, we stop at Ballygrant Inn for lunch. Their menu does not disappoint - that is the whisky menu. I spot one of my favourite whiskies that is no longer in production - maybe it's a sign. Four distilleries and God knows how many drams in, there is simply no stopping now. I order it, along with a lovely soup and a sandwich - I'm a responsible adult after all.

Back on the road, we are now making our way down the Rhinns of Islay, a peninsula in the west of the island. We stop at Bruichladdich Distillery, the 5th distillery on our itinerary today. Never a fan of their unpeated whisky, I fell in love with their bottle design though, and during our obligatory tasting the guide tells us a little more about it. Like many other distilleries on Islay, it faced difficulties in the 80s and 90s. Demand was low and so the distillery was closed in 1994. Eventually, it was bought and re-opened, and with the takeover came a new design. You might have spotted the bright blue bottles of their flagship whisky in the shops, The Classic Laddie. They are hard to miss. Others are bright yellow - a perfect harmony of colours. The design was inspired by the local surroundings, our guide tells us. And one look across the road confirms this. Yellow wildflowers bloom by the shoreline, forming a carpet that perfectly frames the bright blue water of the ocean. You could have popped bottles from the shop into this landscape and they would have blended in perfectly. Never to be seen again. At least not if you had as many drams as me.

Having seen 8 of Islay's whisky distilleries so far, we couldn't help but make one final stop - the 9th distillery was waiting for us. Kilchoman Distillery is in many ways different from other distilleries on Islay. First of all, it's not by the sea - you can't even see the sea from here. It isn't painted white, like the others, and doesn't have its name painted on the side - in fact, if it wasn't for the characteristic pagoda on top of one of the buildings, you couldn't even tell that it is a distillery. Kilchoman is also unique in that they use barley from Islay. Other distilleries buy most of their barley from farms on the mainland, but Kilchoman is surrounded by fields. They grow much of their own supply themselves and buy more from other farms on the island. We tour the distillery and stop on the malting floor to have a taste of the core range. This is one of only 7 distilleries in Scotland where the barley is malted on site. The barley is first soaked in water and then laid out on a concrete floor. Some poor soul then has to turn the barley regularly by hand and eventually the grains will germinate, turning starch into fermentable sugars. It's basically where the magic begins.

Merry on the way to tipsy, we continue our tour. Luckily, I have visited enough distilleries by now to know the rest of the process by heart. Malting, peating, mashing, fermenting, distilling, maturing, bottling. Even though every distillery follows these same basic steps, they have each perfected their own secret recipes to the T. At the end of our tour, we each receive a dram for the road - a small bottle of Kilchoman and a tasting glass to take away.

I hop back on the bus, thinking we're ready to return to Bowmore - but our guide has one final ace up his sleeve. Slowly he drives down a narrow road towards the coast. We park up and even though it is windy, I can hear the waves rolling onto the shore in the distance. I follow the others down a sandy path, my feet digging into the ground, sand running down the insides of my trainers. I emerge from the dunes and see in front of me, a sprawling beach. It is low tide and the edge of the water seems miles away. I take off my shoes and my socks and start walking on the hardened sand. There are footsteps in the sand, and lots of paw prints. But apart from our small group, the beach is empty now. Only us and the waves. I walk towards the water and dip my toes in - it's icy cold.

I take out the small whisky bottle. Machir Bay, it says on it - the name of the expression, but also of this beach. Like many whiskies on Islay, it is named after a scenic spot near the distillery. I pour the golden liquid into my glass. Uisge beatha - water of life. I take a sip and think about my journey to this very moment. The time and effort I invested to mature my taste buds. The knowledge I picked up along the way.

Maybe you find yourself wondering if *you* will ever like whisky. Well, let me tell you one thing - the best things in life come to those who are patient and maybe one day, if you only keep trying, you might also learn this acquired taste.

I hope you enjoyed this story about visiting the Isle of Islay and I've inspired you to visit too one day in the near future.

A lot has changed since my first visit to Islay - Ardbeg has recently finished its new stillhouse to ramp up production, Kilchoman has been painted white and a new distillery in Port Ellen is under way - I guess, I'll have to plan a return visit soon!

Now, it's time for the practical part of the show - as always, here are my top 5 travel tips for a trip to Islay, whether you're planning a whisky pilgrimage or just looking for a stunning island to add to your itinerary.

Tip Number 1: Join a guided tour

Visiting Islay with a guided tour was the best decision I ever made. It meant that I didn't have to worry about driving and could fully concentrate on enjoying one dram after the other. We visited all 9 distilleries on the island in two days and also had time to stop at scenic beaches, historic sites and other places of interest on Islay. I could never have done this by myself.

Our driver guide also arranged some top-notch deals with the distilleries and made sure we never sat in the bus too long without a stop for a dram.

I partnered with Rabbie's to try their 4-day Islay Whisky tour. They only use small buses for up to 16 people and since everyone shared an interest in whisky, it was a great group experience. I published my review of the tour on Watch Me See.com I will link to it in the show notes.

Tip Number 2: Visit for the Islay Festival of Malt and Music

The Islay Festival takes place every year in May. This year, the virtual programme takes place from the 28th of May to the 6th of June. The festival puts on activities like ceilidh's, recitals, Gaelic lessons and folk music, and every day, another distillery - including the one on Jura - is taking the stage to host whisky tastings. You can check out the programme on [islay festival.com](http://islayfestival.com)

If you want to attend the festival in person one day, I can only recommend to start looking into accommodation early - after two years of virtual events, I expect next year's festival to be even busier than usual.

Tip Number 3: Bring paracetamol

Or any other kind of headache medication. I'm just gonna leave it at that.

Tip Number 4: It's not all about whisky

I know that whisky isn't everybody's cup of tea - but don't worry - Islay is still worth a visit. There are also two gin distilleries on the island - The Botanist made at Bruichladdich and Nerabus made by Islay Gin Limited.

And then there is Islay Wines, a company in Port Ellen that produces various wines made from local ingredients like barley, rhubarb and bramble. The owners found an old recipe book and started experimenting. It's no merlot or chardonnay, but the fruity wines have a lovely taste in their own right.

Tip Number 5: Of course, there's more to Islay than the booze

There are many other things to do on Islay that have nothing to do with whisky, gin or wine. Beaches from Machir Bay to the Big Strand that stretches for 7 miles from Kintra to Laggan Farm. Castles and historic sites like Dunyvaig, Finlaggan or Kildalton Cross. Nature reserves and bird colonies. Picturesque villages from Bowmore to Port Charlotte. You can go sea kayaking or fat biking on the beaches. There is really no shortage of things to see and activities to try on Islay.

And with this, I send you off to dream about your own trip to Islay. The island is opening up to domestic tourism along with the rest of Scotland this week, but be aware that ferries, accommodations, restaurants and distilleries will be running on a reduced capacity for the foreseeable future. Plan well ahead if you're looking to visit.

I'm off on my own adventure this weekend, to a completely different part of Scotland - but rest assured, I will definitely try to fit in a whisky distillery or two. It might have not been love at first sight, but I've really come to embrace Scottish whisky with all my heart.

Thank you so much for tuning in and listening to Wild for Scotland. If you enjoyed the podcast, please subscribe to it, leave a review on Apple Podcasts or share your favourite episode with a friend. Sign up for my email list, connect with me on socials or visit the website, WildforScotland.com. There you will find photos from today's travel story, transcripts and other episodes.

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You'll find all the links in the show notes.

Wild for Scotland is written, hosted and produced by me, Kathi Kamleitner, with additional support by Fran Turauskis. Podcast art is by Lizzie Vaughan-Knight, the Tartan Trailburner and all original music is composed by Bruce Wallace.

Until next, time when we travel to a different place in Scotland.