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Will Paddle For Whisky

Scotland's Inner Hebrides are a sea kayaker's dream and home to some of the world's best single malts. Yet no one has ever brought them together—until now.

Text by Andrew Todhunter

Paddling hard through spray-capped swells and breaking chop in 20-mile-an-hour winds, we rounded a ragged point on the western shore of Jura and set out across the Sound of Islay. Beyond the chaotic seas, the current ripping south, we could already see a brilliant smear of white in the distance, a telltale gleam that could be only one thing in Scotland's Inner Hebrides: the broad, whitewashed, and stenciled wall of a single malt Scotch distillery. Our guide, Tony Hammock, estimated the force of the current, took a compass bearing, and shouted out our heading. If we kept this pace, he told us, we'd fight our way to the distillery within the hour.

This was good news. We'd been kayaking hard for most of the day. Our shoulders and backs ached, and the wisdom of a late spring paddling trip in western Scotland was falling into question. But then that daub of white bobbed onto the horizon. At the end of the crossing waited more than a dry place out of the wind. There was a golden dram of single malt whisky for each of us, straight from the hand of its maker, a spirit distilled, casked, bottled, and poured less than a stone's throw from where we'd beach our kayaks.

Some of the best single malt whisky in Scotland is distilled and barreled on the shores of the Inner Hebrides, an archipelago off the country's west coast. So when I learned that Hammock, a former whitewater kayaking coach and the owner of Sea Freedom Kayak, could customize a trip around the islands of Jura and Islay that included pauses to sip whisky at coastal distilleries along the way, I figured I'd finally found an ethical way to drink and drive. In five days, Hammock had us slated to hit four distilleries, a remote beach camp, and a handful of quaint Scottish inns. To his knowledge, such a trip was unprecedented. Given the beauty of the waters, renowned among boaters worldwide, and the quality of the whisky ashore, it's a wonder no one had thought of it before.

We began our journey a day earlier in the village of Crinan on the mainland, a castle-studded, loch-raked landscape as green as Ireland and home to the earliest Scots. We struck northwest, through small chop, and made for the north end of Jura, not quite seven nautical miles distant. Hammock had arranged a new, English-made North Shore Buccaneer for me to paddle. A sleek yellow craft with red-and-black trim, it handled beautifully and had enough volume in forward and aft hatches for longer expeditions—or hundreds of well-padded Scotch bottles. As Jura's mass came more clearly into view, the island appeared untamed and nearly uninhabited. A lone white farmhouse hunched invitingly in its lee. It was the kind of place you'd want to move into on sight, cut the phone lines, and catch up on a few years of back reading. In 1948, while fighting the tuberculosis that would kill him two years later, George Orwell finished *1984* in another white farmhouse a mile or so south along the coast. He had wanted to be somewhere wild and remote, where the world couldn't easily find him. Sixty years later, not much had changed.

At midday we rounded the northern tip of Jura into the Gulf of Corryvreckan, a legendary patch of water long categorized as unnavigable by the English Navy. The rocky-bottom topography, ripping tides, and sea swell in the straits between Jura and its northern neighbor, Scarba, often collude to create one of the world's most infamous maelstroms—a swirling, sucking mass of whitewater feared by sailors for centuries. Standing waves can reach heights of 30 feet; their roar can be heard ten miles away. Locals call it the Hag, among less flattering names, and when it's going off, no sane person in a small craft goes near it. To illustrate the point, a BBC documentary team once threw a mannequin into the whirlpool—a simulated paddler or diver equipped with a

regulation life jacket and a depth gauge. The Hag promptly swallowed the offering, ignoring the flotation device. When the mannequin finally resurfaced, far down current, it appeared to have been dragged violently along the rocks below. Its depth gauge had maxed out at 262 feet. To our mixed relief and disappointment, the Hag was asleep when we passed; Hammock had wisely timed our crossing to slack tide. Rather than skirting the beast, we rested our paddles and let a light current carry us southwest along the coast.

The Hebrides are divided into two regions, Inner and Outer, and across Scotland they are considered a region apart. Many locals still speak Scottish Gaelic and refer in passing to their Norse heritage (the Vikings ruled the islands from the ninth to 13th century). Whisky is a big draw for visitors, but even more so is the land itself. The islands' complex geology creates a distinct landscape, a series of rugged, windswept isles, mosaics of cliffs, headlands, and rolling hills. Townships are few, and open spaces are many. And while the Inner Hebrides are just a few hours from Glasgow—an easy weekend trip from anywhere in the United Kingdom—they feel more like the edge of the world. Nowhere more so, perhaps, than off the wild coastline of Jura.

Jura supports only one real town, Craighouse; one source of whisky (the Isle of Jura distillery); more than 5,000 red deer; and fewer than 200 human inhabitants. Seen from the waterline, even that census seemed like an overestimate. Our sole companions were hundreds of seabirds, including a lone puffin, and herds of wild goats grazing on kelp across the cobbled beaches. We paddled past rocky coves and intricate basalt formations, the steep walls pocketed with caves. I asked Hammock about a string of gray streaks high on the sloping hillsides. They are raised beaches, he said, created in the wake of melting ice caps 17,000 years ago. Freed of the weight of the ice, the mass of Jura shifted slightly, lifting its western shore as much as 120 feet above the waterline.

The wind rose as we paddled south, gusting to force 5 (19 to 24 miles an hour). The glassy conditions of the gulf quickly deteriorated into three-foot swells and whitecaps. Such "gray and lumpy" conditions are typical, Hammock said, but they made for some pretty rigorous paddling. Before we left, Hammock had mentioned that Scotland offers the full gamut of sea kayaking possibilities. Novices can take day trips on sheltered lochs, visiting ancient castles and learning skills along the way, while intermediates and experts can mount multiday expeditions, landing on wilderness beaches and camping on sparsely inhabited islands. He had told us that our first ever journey could verge on the more extreme side but that there was nothing to worry about. Nothing, provided we disregarded the fast growing waves breaking over the decks of our kayaks. The cost of being pioneers, I suppose.

We reached our beach camp at Jura's Shian Bay that evening, exhausted after paddling close to 22 nautical miles from Crinan harbor. Before dinner, I rallied some strength to hike up through a field of fern and bog cotton to inspect one of those raised beaches, a hundred-yard-long swath of packed stones piled steeply into a well-defined wall. Could the wind have blown them into such a sharp ridge, I wondered, given enough time? Not stones of that size—nothing could have formed this but the pounding waves. This wall, I realized, had been beaten into shape by storms that struck the beach more than 10,000 years before Christ, more than 7,000 years before Khufu built the Great Pyramid. The stones had sat this way ever since, unneeded and thus undisturbed for more than 400 generations. I picked one up, weighed it in my hand, and set it carefully back in place.

If there is one word that is most bandied about by serious Scotch whisky drinkers, it is likely to be "peat." The ancient, partially decayed vegetable matter is essential to the making of Scotch. It flavors the local water used in distillation, and peat smoke is employed to dry malted barley, the raw material of Scotch whisky. The result is a characteristic and much sought-after smokiness. Islay has no shortage of peat. And for that reason, its distilleries produce some of the boldest, most complex single malt whiskies in the world.

On the afternoon of the second day, having crossed the Sound of Islay, we finally came ashore at the first distillery on our sea route. Bunnahabhain, pronounced boo-na-ha-venn, was 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 distillation. The good stuff lies in the middle portion, or the "heart" of a run, which, under the expert eye of the stillman, is directed into the spirit receiver to be casked and aged.

Within the dim warehouse at Bunnahabhain stood row upon row of casks of aging whisky: There were some 22,000 on the premises. In order to qualify as Scotch whisky, the spirit must be aged in an oak cask for a minimum of three years; this mellows the whisky, reducing its alcohol content and imparting color and flavor from the wood. Within the sealed casks, over time, a small 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 coves and a lattice of tiny islands lay forested hills and farms. The wildlife, as on Jura, was abundant and varied. In two hours we saw two otters out fishing, scores of seals, and seabirds beyond counting, including oystercatchers, shags, razorbills, and guillemots.

Endlessly cheerful and astutely observant, Hammock is as fine a teacher and guide as he is a technical paddler. I asked him what it was that had kept him so engaged for so long. "There's no one telling you what you can and cannot do," he said, "and on this vast medium of sea and rivers and lakes you can go exactly where you want to go.

"Then there's also the wildlife," he continued. "I was once on a standing wave in a tide race between two islands, paddling with a friend, and we met a gray seal surfing the same wave. The seal looked up at us, and this sounds bizarre, but in your head you find yourself saying to the seal, 'Good wave, isn't it?!' And his expression seems to say, 'Yeah, it's great!' There's no need for these seals to surf. They're not hunting. They're just playing, like us, for pure enjoyment."

East of Port Ellen, we soon rounded a point and paddled into the cove of the Laphroaig distillery. It was closed to tours on Saturday, we discovered, but we could hear the hum of the machines within. Another mile up the coast was Lagavulin, and beyond that lay Ardbeg—all three produce world-class single malts known for their strong peaty character. For those who care seriously about complex Scotch whisky, this was like having Chartres, Bourges, and Notre Dame cathedrals on one short road for the pious.

As we turned into the cove at Lagavulin, still a hundred yards offshore, a soft breeze brought with it the warm smell of peat smoke, burning in the distillery. The ruins of a 16th-century castle stood high on a point on the other side of the cove. I paddled on. At 50 yards, on the same breeze, I got the first smell, rich and silken, of the whisky itself. There it goes, I thought, the angels' share.

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