



WHISKY 101

Visiting a Scotch Whisky Distillery

VISITING A Scotch whisky distillery is a treat for the senses: the aromas fill the air as you walk propitiously towards the pagoda, malted barley grains trickle through your fingers, the cupreous luster of the stills, the hushed echoes returning from the thick gloom of the warehouse, and the felicitousness of that first sip. But what should you expect from the best distillery tour? You want a knowledgeable guide who can reveal the process of whisky making at that establishment from just three ingredients. You hope to ascertain which aspects of production are responsible for the malt's distinctive character by congregating around the very apparatus that shape the flavors. To conclude, you clamor for a generous pour of the liquid that compelled your pilgrimage before capitalizing on the opportunity to snare a trophy bottle unseen back home, a key to unlocking your memories of the day you stood on the hallowed ground, mesmerized by the spirit safe's beseeching gurgle.

Wish you were here

A good place to begin is the Scotch Whisky Association's (SWA) website for the annual list of working distilleries and their opening times. However, this list is not comprehensive, comprising only SWA members, and there are many others open to tour.

During whisky festivals, special admittance can be available to distilleries otherwise closed to the public. Geographically, there is logic to heading to regions rich in distilling traditions, such as Islay or Speyside, or making straight for the home of your favorite dram. Certain distilleries require you to phone ahead and book a tour, especially if you have

a large party or plan to visit out of season (a good opportunity to inquire if they are in full production). Check the distillery website for updates before you set off, as where else are you going to find out that there will be no tours of Blair Athol distillery between April and June, 2010 due to a major maintenance program? Hunt out ancillary attractions like the Speyside Cooperage or Dallas Dhu distillery—now a museum run by Historic Scotland—and purchase a decent roadmap if you're traveling independently, as many distilleries are pleasingly remote and reception for your GPS can be patchy.

Whisky on Tour

Tours can be free of charge (Glenlivet, Edradour, and Glenfiddich), but most standard tours are \$6-10 per person. The history of the distillery and its founders, and the story of the brand will be given by a tour guide (there *will* be tartan) or theater presentation (there *may* be bagpipes). A sequential tour of the mill room, mash room, washbacks, and still house will follow. You may get a view of a bonded warehouse or the filling store before ending in the bar for a tasting. Don't be afraid to ask questions, although not all seasonal staff are whisky experts. Photographs are permitted, but are often restricted in the still house due to a perceived fire risk. Just

refrain from asking about this modern wisdom, when the stills were once directly-fired from beneath, or when copper-smiths may use welding equipment on one still when an adjacent still is boiling.

Superficially, the fundamental principles of whisky production appear as similar from one distillery tour to the next, as the tall tales told of recreating each dent in a replacement still or the neighborhood cows getting tipsy on the draff sold by the distillery. But 'seen one, seen 'em all' doesn't hold true for distilleries. Search out the variety and unique experiences to be discovered from floor maltings at Balvenie and Bowmore, the assortment of squat through to pear-shaped stills, Edradour's quaint Morton refrigerator to Alex Frost's floating noses in the Glenfiddich distillery dam.

To your health (and safety)

Each distillery is working to make new spirit first and a visitor attraction second. You will find yourself climbing up and



down steep stairs, crossing metal grill flooring, and heading into and out from the Scottish weather, so dress appropriately. Consequentially, parts of many tours may not always be accessible for those with physical disabilities, though Scottish hospitality will ensure the maximum is done to accommodate you. Children younger than 8 years old are usually not admitted to production areas. Finally, you don't need to be told, but it needs to be said; have a designated driver so nobody drinks and drives.

You're worth it

Once you've notched up a few visits, you should indulge in a connoisseur tour run by an experienced guide. Some are fractionally more expensive and offer a wider tasting at the end of the standard tour, but others provide in-depth explanations and special access to bonded warehouses for tutored vertical tastings of aged malts, new make spirit, or cask-drawn samples. These enjoyable tours can last several hours and pre-booking is essential. Try Aberfeldy/Dewar's, Glenturret, Bowmore, Laphroaig, Balvenie, or Glenfiddich, but Glengoyne leads the pack with six different tours, including their \$165 Masterclass experience comprising a detailed tour, nosing and tasting of Glengoyne 17 year old, three single cask samples, grain whisky, and a blending session where you can bottle the result.

Afore ye go

Naturally, each tour ends in the store, where having imbibed a dram or two, you may be susceptible to a little shopping. A good distillery shop will reward visitors with distillery-only releases and personalized labels, or try hand-bottling at Aberlour, Balvenie, Pulteney, or a Bruichladdich Valinch bottling. The entry ticket at Diageo distilleries is redeemable against a bottle and they often stock special re-

leases (their networked system enables you to inquire about bottlings at other Diageo distilleries). Edradour displays countless Signatory releases, but when LVMH took over Glenmorangie and Ardbeg, they concentrated on only one brand per distillery. Aside from the malts, the store will try to tempt you with everything from whisky fudge, soap, T-shirts, and cycling jerseys to cufflinks, quaiches, nosing glasses, and water jugs. To recover, you'll need to stop for lunch; Ardbeg, Aberfeldy, Glenturret, and Glenlivet all have excellent cafés. So what are you waiting for? —

You clamor for a generous pour of the liquid that compelled your pilgrimage before capitalizing on the opportunity to snare a trophy bottle unseen back home, a key to unlocking your memories of the day you stood on the hallowed ground.

