

Spiritual HIGHLAND

With such gems as the Boat of Garton, Granttown-on-Spey, Elgin and Moray on the itinerary, small wonder that Speyside is one of the most popular destinations for golfers in search of the true Highlands experience. That the Speyside Valley is home to over half of Scotland's malt whiskey distilleries is a rather happy coincidence, as **Mark Alexander** reports

PHOTOGRAPHY: MARK ALEXANDER

The par three opening hole at the Boat of Garton, a James Braid classic and renowned as one of the Highland's most picturesque layouts

WHISKY AND GOLF WERE MADE FOR EACH OTHER. PERHAPS it's the intoxicating aroma of the spirit mixed with the exhilaration of the game, but their compatibility has created a multi-million pound industry based on the bond between sport and booze.

Their association has been long and fruitful. At the corporate end, tournament sponsorship has been the most obvious upshot, but the relationship between a round of golf and a wee dram goes far deeper than advertising boards and prize money. Clinking glasses at the end of a hard-fought match has been customary since golf came of age. It's part of the fabric. So where better to explore this lasting bond than in the golden

land of the Speyside Valley where almost half of Scotland's famous malt whiskey distilleries are located.

This remarkable wedge of the Scottish Highlands is home to clear springs and abundant supplies of fragrant golden barley – the key ingredients for making whisky. It also boasts a string of fabulous tracks penned by some of the legends of golf course design, with views to match.

River rivalry

Laid out by James Braid and opened 112 years ago, Boat of Garton (known locally as the 'Boat') has long been associated

with Highland golf, and with good reason. This parkland track has an enviable reputation for its scenic charms which are evident from the first tee. The par-three opener certainly tests the nerves but also provides the first glimpse of Lairig Ghru and Braeriach – the great mountain passes and corries of the Cairngorm mountain range.

For all its Highland grandeur, the first hole does little to indicate what's to follow however. After all, the fairway is relatively flat and sedate. The second hole puts the record straight with undulations, dips and hollows that create a fairway of infinite possibilities. It's a pattern repeated from then on in with blind

shots and uneven stances galore. In fact, the challenge presented by the Boat is anchored in the course's contours which can entice your ball into danger all too easily. For the first-timer, playing the course with a member (the Ladies Captain in my case!) is a must.

"The Boat is a great example of a course that doesn't need to be long to be difficult," says Scottish golf course architect Tom Mackenzie who advised the club on some changes to the course a few years back. "It's narrow, bouncy and up and down, so you have to negotiate your way through it. You can't just blast your way round. It is Highland golf."

(Right, top to bottom): Banks of heather and luxuriant trees frame the challenge at Granttown-on-Spey; the championship-standard layout at Forres; sprays of gorse lie in wait at Moray

Given the right guidance, there are plenty of holes to savour, such as the spectacular 12th with the ubiquitous glare of the Cairngorms in the background. And with the River Spey running down one side of the course, it's difficult to fault such an endearing layout.

If you had to pick out a downside, the condition of the greens would be a likely candidate. Don't get me wrong, the shape and challenge are there, but the harsh winter had left its mark so viciously that the green-keeping staff will have their work cut out to rectify the situation.

The Boat's shortcomings can be put into context by playing Granttown-on-Spey, which is found approximately 10 miles north on the A95. No unfavourable pot marks or baron patches here, instead the putting surfaces are smooth and true with little sign of any damage, be it snow induced or otherwise.

Granttown predates the Boat by eight years, although its current layout is far from original. In fact, during its history, the course has been adjusted and improved by the collective flare of Willie Park and James Braid.

Perhaps as a result, the course rambles somewhat and can be readily divided into three groups of six, with the middle section being the tasty filling in the Granttown sandwich. It's here you'll find large greens surrounded by colourful heather banked by imposing galleries of trees. This is where challenge and strategy play on your mind as you tee up, and where you'll find cracking views of distance peaks which typify Highland golf.

This sextet of core holes is the pinnacle of the round and stay in the mind long after the final putt has dropped. With names like Murdees View and Caper Cailzie, they are taxing and

beautiful and represent great value given the club's modest green fees.

It's a pity the closing holes don't follow suite. The spirit of the middle six seem to drain away in the closing third which is disappointing although not unsurprising given the sedate start during which the opening holes also lacked the drama of the middle order. A tasty consolation is the food served in the clubhouse which prompted a surge in social members when the catering team of Stewart Anderson and Suzanne Wilson took up their posts a year and a half ago.

Inland beauties

Closer to the coast, Elgin is the setting of a challenging heathland course that stretches to nearly 6,500 yards and carries with it a stringent par of 69. With nine par fours over 400 yards, Elgin Golf Club is set up for big hitters.

That's not to say Elgin is all about length. This inland course has teeth with hills and undulations creating a fine collection of well-framed holes. Indeed, despite the scorecard giving stroke index one to the 14th, the toughest hole during the weekly medal is typically the first as it heads directly into the prevailing wind. Named after the club's first green-keeper who was instrumental in the design of the course, John McPherson appears innocuous enough. But at 454 yards into the wind, this tasty par-four opener can test your spirits all too easily.

From then on in, lush grasses and banks of trees define attractive holes that offer a variety of golfing challenges. It is fun, if a little conventional.

Like Elgin, Forres Golf Club is an inland track with plenty of

history. Established in 1889, the original layout was designed by James Braid and then later added to by Willie Park. This eclectic mix worked well creating an interesting layout with plenty of elevated tees and captivating holes. Not surprisingly, the course has since hosted the Scottish Professional Championship and the Northern Open.

Indeed, it was during the Northern Open in 2000 that the course record of 60 was set by the English pro Jim Payne with eight birdies and an eagle. He could have gone one better and cracked the magical 60 had it not been for a tricky 20 footer insists Sandy Aird, the club's professional. "The only break was in his wrists," he mocks.

Aird has been plying his trade at the northerly course since 1988 and knows the very best routes around this attractive track. "There are no problems in any of the fairways," he jokes but after playing the first five holes, I beg to differ.

While fairway bunkers don't come into play that often, hitting the correct side of the fairway is key. Take the second and the fourth. Both require drives down the left-hand side of the fairway to take advantage of large slopes and undulations. Playing it out right leaves you with long approach shots and missed scoring opportunities.

The course's signature hole is deserved of the title. The 16th is a magical design that relies on visual trickery rather than length to baffle, and yet it is all laid out in front of you. In my mind at least, a good hole prompts animated debate about how to tackle the challenge ahead. Pond, as the 16th is called, had our group chattering like a group of excited hyenas.

Something to shout about

If the sound of lively discussion around a tee box is the sign of a virtuous golf hole, then the Old Course at Moray Golf Club resounds to a symphony of exhilarated chat. Reverberating with golfers' eulogising as they stride among the dunes and gorse, Moray - or Lossie as it is known locally due to its proximity to Lossiemouth - is a fabulous exponent of links golf. Or to put it more accurately, Lossie is a fabulous exponent of Speyside links golf; since the club owes much, if not everything, to whisky.

Established in 1889, the original membership of the Moray Golf Club included influential distillers who, in 1900, purchased 54 gallons of Glen Grant whisky and bottled it as a club malt. It's a tradition that has continued until this day.

"We have a 10-year-old, single malt, which is affectionately known as 'The Club'" says Steve Crane, secretary of Moray Golf club. "The members just love it. To have your own labelled whisky is a great marketing tool."

Not that Moray should need promotional gimmicks to attract punters. The course was laid out by the grand master of links design, Old Tom Morris, who knew a thing or two about routing golf holes through sandy soils and dunescapes. As a result, the



On a clear day, the views at the Boat are breathtaking, such as this from the tee at the par-four 2nd hole



The delightful links of Moray is rich in history – the course was designed by none other than Old Tom Morris



Old Course is a feast of beautifully crafted links holes that engage and test.

Indeed, it's hard to isolate one hole over another but the third, which dog legs from left to right, requires a good drive to set up a testing mid iron to a handsomely elevated green. As it happens, this lovely hole is preceded by a cracking par five and followed by a devilishly tricky par three. Like so many holes on the Old Course, the third is part of a string of exciting golfing holes that demand imagination as well as golfing skill.

"It's a true Scottish links, in that you play nine out of town, turn, and play the back nine towards town, so it's very similar to St Andrews," says Crane. "It's fair to say that our 18th, which is our signature hole, is recognised as one of the best finishing holes in Scotland."

He's not wrong. The 408-yard closing hole is a cracker with the tee set tight against a cliff face that runs the length of the hole

down the right-hand side. Above are houses and hotels which enjoy remarkable vantage points from which to observe your best efforts to hit the wickedly contoured green.

If that wasn't enough, the club also boasts a second course designed by Henry Cotton which is a little shorter and somewhat tighter. To top it off, the 36 holes are meticulously cared for by George Paterson and his skilled team of greenkeepers.

It would be amiss of me not to mention the RAF jets from Lossiemouth that pass within touching distance of many flag sticks. Thunderously loud, the fighter-bombers can either entertain or perplex. Added to the din of visitors waxing lyrical about the course, Lossie can be a less than peaceful place to play golf.

That said, if the essence of whisky could merge with a golf course, the resulting blend would be Moray Golf Club, with the occasional roar thrown in for good measure. *Slainte!* Long live the spirit of Highland golf. You'll love it – and come back for more.



WHERE TO PLAY

- Boat of Garten Golf & Tennis Club
www.boatgolf.com
£35/round/weekday
- Granttown-on-Spey Golf Club
www.granttownonspeygc.co.uk
£29/round/weekday
- Moray Golf Club
www.moraygolf.co.uk
£49.50/round/weekday
- Elgin Golf Club
www.elgingolfclub.com
£37/round/weekday
- Forres Golf Club
www.forresgolfclub.co.uk
£35/round

WHERE TO STAY

- The Sunninghill Hotel
www.sunninghillhotel.com
- Westhaven B&B
www.westhavenb-b.co.uk
- Knockomie Hotel
www.knockomie.co.uk

Mark Alexander's trip was arranged by the Speyside Whisky Trail and Visitscotland

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