

SPEYSIDE GOLF AND WHISKY TRAIL

- A MARRIAGE MADE IN HEAVEN

Slow-turning seasons, soft mountain water and the distiller's centuries-old craft combine to create Scotland's number one export, whisky, 'The Water of Life'. David J. Whyte takes a slightly meandering amble along Speyside's Golf Whisky Trail sampling the 'Spirit' of this unique part of Scotland. And some golf of course!

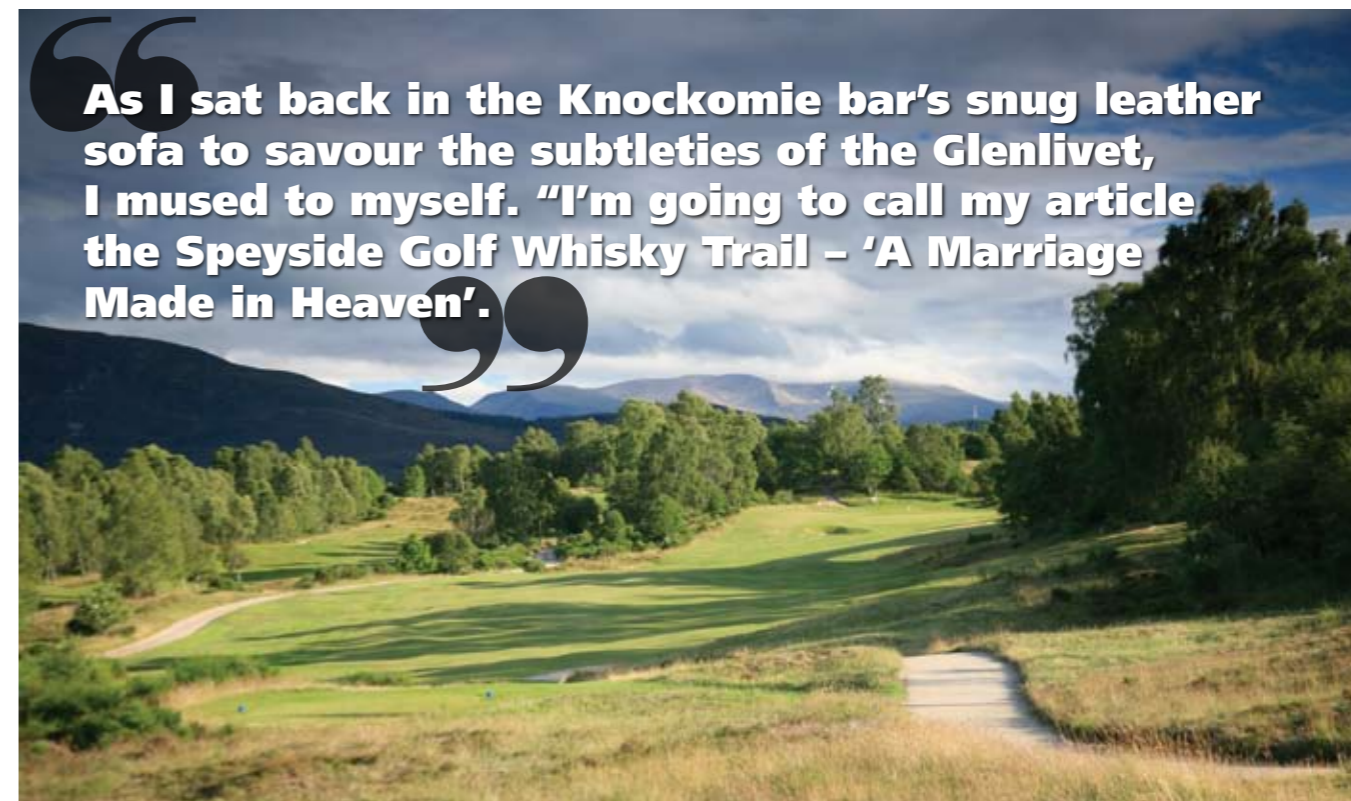
STORY AND PHOTOGRAPHY BY DAVID J. WHYTE



The busier parts of the Home of Golf get gazillions of golfers. There's nothing wrong with that except you sometimes feel you're on a conveyor belt. "Hey, there's the guys we saw in Dornoch. Yeah, I saw them in Carnoustie and they're heading for Gleneagles next – just like us!" Sometimes it pays to get off the beaten track!

Speyside is a serene and secluded part of the Scottish Highlands, punctuated with spectacular scenery, superb golf and 28 of the world's most famous whisky distilleries on or near the banks of the Spey! The fast flowing River Spey has the purest water in the entire British Isles, ideal for the creation of single malt whisky.

"Golf & Whisky! What an ideal combination!" I mused as I sat in the bar at the Knockomie Hotel in the delightful wee town of Forres nursing a 10-year-old Benromach with the flavours of dark



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chocolate, melted butter and sticky toffee pudding tickling my taste buds. As if by magic this mouth-watering mélange transformed into a finish of sweet fruit – or was it California raisins with a hint of Reggae Reggae Barbeque Sauce? Wow! I was really getting the hang of this whisky-tasting business.

subtle aromas while your taste buds only appreciate the basic flavours of sweet, sour, salty or bitter. Get your nose working with your taste buds and you'll soon appreciate the uniqueness of each malt."

I could tell my whisky-tasting apprenticeship could take many more hours of practical study. "What else do you recommend?" I enthusiastically asked Penny. She poured me a 12-year old Glenlivet; honeyed, biscuit-sweet with a malty edge, its tawny smoothness and elderberry after-taste adding an ever-more romantic glow to the prospect of exploring this fascinating part of Scotland as well as sampling its produce. As I sat back in the Knockomie bar's snug leather sofa to savour the subtleties of the Glenlivet, I mused to myself. "I'm going to call my article the

Speyside Golf Whisky Trail – 'A Marriage Made in Heaven'. I drank a toast to my inspired if now somewhat inebriated musing and stumbled off to bed, half expecting to forget all by dawn's early light."

Moray Old

A 20-minute drive from Knockomie House Hotel is one of Scotland's most laudable links, Moray Old. This is golf-by-the-sea as it should be, an unadulterated coastal track laid out by Old Tom Morris way back in 1889. I don't think the Great Grandfather of Golf had much designing to do here. This is as natural a golf terrain as you will find. Like St Andrews, Moray Old starts and finishes in town. It plays out towards Covesea Lighthouse before turning at the 12th, tracing the beach back and





Moray Old Golf Course

catching the full effect of tempest and tide. The 18th is considered one of the finest finishing holes in Scotland. Its green sits on a raised, natural amphitheatre usually overlooked by knowledgeable and far too interested locals.

Moray is thrilling golf, the turf as tight as a whisky barrel's bung and it's a joy to strike those penetrating, low, long irons off! Well, it would be if you have that shot. Links golf, as you no doubt know requires a whole new bagful of shots. Firm, fast-running fairways with subtle humps and bumps add yards to your drives as well as an element of unpredictability to the ball's final resting place. Playing into firm, flat greens also changes the paradigm; I never realised playing off such tight, closely mown turf can generate backspin. I don't usually do backspin! And then there's the wind! There can't be a round that goes by here without those variable coastal breezes exerting considerable influence.

It's all in a day's links golf and this Moray Golf Club is certainly the ideal place to spend the day. The club offers an excellent two-course pass to play Moray New which offers tighter fairways and smaller greens before taking on the

rigours of the Old. The ticket is a bargain at only £65 through the week and £75 at weekends.

Forres

In terms of golfing variety, the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail presents an eclectic collection. Forres Golf Club is an excellent heathland-parkland combination ideal for golfers of all persuasions. Each hole is different from the diving-board drop at the 1st to thought provoking, risk-reward holes

such as the 16th. Designed by two old-time Open champions James Braid and Willie Park, Forres is not long by today's standards but there is a wealth of intricacy out there as confirmed by its regular appearance as a venue for the Scottish Professional Championship, the Northern Open, and the Scottish Young Professionals Championships. I also enjoyed Forres's tranquil location, a delightful woodland theatre surrounding some gorgeous holes with the occasional glimpse of the Moray Firth.



Forres Golf Club 16th

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- Moray Old

Whisky Trail

The Speyside Golf Whisky Trail is an association of golf courses, distilleries and hotels whose main purpose in life is to help golfers like us discover and appreciate this very special part of Scotland. There are four golf clubs involved, Boat of Garten, Forres and Grantown on Spey, all distinct Highland heathland tracks of Hellenistic beauty and Moray Golf Club with its two well-ventilated 18's adding the links element. Besides great golf, they've gone to lengths to bring together all that's best in Speyside including its whisky, food, and sightseeing along with classy, comfortable accommodation.

In the Royal Burgh of Elgin with its magnificent cathedral ruins and elegant neoclassical architecture, Sunninghill is a superb little hotel, renowned for its friendliness and fine cooking. Sunninghill is the economic option while Knockomie is more of a boutique-

style experience with all the charms of a secluded country house.

I spent two nights at the Knockomie and then two with Winnie Ross and her husband, Donald at the Sunninghill. Winnie and Donald have garnered an excellent reputation for their food and hospitality and the best way to experience this is at one of their special whisky dinners, which can be organised at the drop of a hat.

Donald's a real whisky connoisseur and delights in talking you through which drams go best with the courses he is serving. A whisky dinner might not have previously crossed your epicurean palate but there are malts of lightness and subtle flavours that go well especially with Scottish dishes the likes of venison or other time-honoured favourites like haggis, neeps and tatties.

Food, by the way is another Speyside speciality that you will want to become familiar with. The area is a veritable

larder of all the very best that Scotland produces. Fresh salmon from the Spey is an obvious choice - and it really is the best. But then there's the prime beef or lamb. And if you want something a little gamier, try venison or perhaps a locally 'bagged' pheasant. In both the hotels I stayed in, everything is produced and sourced locally as well as prepared to the highest standards.

If you really want to go off on a foodie tangent, Baxters of Speyside, Scotland's most famous canned soup emporium is only a 10-minute drive away from Elgin in the delightfully named town of Fochabers. Since 1868 the Baxter family have been preserving, canning and bottling the best of Speyside and exporting it around the globe. The factory is a virtual tourist village and well worth a visit. And what should you have with afternoon tea? Mouth-watering Walkers Shortbread world headquarters is only 15 minutes south of Elgin or Forres in Aberlour.

There is one shop however that you really shouldn't miss where you can find everything the area produces in glorious abundance. Gordon & MacPhail's on South Street in Elgin, reputedly the world's leading malt whisky specialist has a staggering choice of 800 different malt whiskies. But it doesn't stop there; this gastronomic Aladdin's Cave is an iconic one-stop-shop for meats, wines, cheeses and chocolates. We



Forres Golf Club 2nd

discovered a bottle of Amrut Indian Whisky but I had to say, it seemed sacrilegious sampling a whisky distilled in Bangalore compared to the superior Speyside varieties from just round the corner. Bespoke tastings can also be organised in Gordon & McPhail's shop for groups by booking in advance (Tel: 01343 545110 or email retail@gordonandmacphail.com). The shop itself is a Scotch Malt institution going all the way back to 1895.

Uisge-Beatha, 'The Water of Life'

Talking about whisky, it was time for me to get back to my malt whisky meanderings. I was scheduled for a visit to Benromach Distillery in Forres, the smallest distillery in Speyside. After the first two or three visits, distillery tours can become a bit repetitive. Benromach is particularly good if you book the Manager's Tour, an informative visit with distillery manager, Keith Cruickshank who brings the process to life followed by a detailed and highly enlightening tasting session. Booking is required (tel: 0044 (0)1309 675968 - email: info@gordonandmacphail.com) but a visit here is highly recommended. You can also 'Bottle Your Own Benromach' at the distillery, label it and cork it. Then there's the ubiquitous visit to the distillery shop. I visited two other distilleries, Glenfiddich and The Glenlivet, both fascinating and well presented but slightly touristier.

Grantown on Spey

Grantown on Spey is a sturdy little Victorian resort developed in 1766 when a trip to the Scottish Highlands was de rigueur. The coming of the railway assured Grantown's success as a holiday town and it has remained so ever since. Its golf course is one of those delightful dalliances where it doesn't really matter how well or poorly you play, because of its stunning setting, you are going to enjoy it anyway. The first few holes serve as warmers while the real action starts



Grantwon Golf Club 8th

after the 6th when the course crosses the road and enters a tree and heather-lined mid-section. Murdie's View is the 9th, a 275-yard Par 4 so it's on the lower limit and most will have a pop at the green from the panoramic high tee. The closing holes are more open and testing. Grantown's not a difficult encounter although occasionally an expected wind (the tee boxes are mostly sheltered) could catch a high ball and blow it off course.

I enjoyed Grantown. The tree-lined section is the most memorable mainly because of its close encounters with Speyside's unique nature. This is red deer, black grouse and red squirrel country so don't be surprised if you spot some movement in the purple heather.

You could conceivably play Grantown and Boat of Garten Golf Club in one day as they are only 10 miles apart.

The Boat

Boat of Garten Golf Club was my last golfing port of call. I was curious about the epithet and Nigel McConachie, the Club's secretary, who makes a point of meeting Golf Whisky Trail visitors for a coffee or something stronger explained, "The name of both the Club and the village comes from the small ferryboat service that used to cross the River Spey here. There's no record when it started but we know it goes back at least as far as 1662. The railway came to Boat of Garten in 1868 and soon after that the ferry was withdrawn. The golf



Grantwon Golf Club



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- Boat of Garten Golf Club

course was officially established in 1898.

And as if by magic, as Nigel was setting the historic scene, an old steam chuffer pulled into Boat of Garten station. "The railway

used to come up to Boat then branch off towards Grantown-on-Spey," Nigel alluded, "or along Speyside to service the distilleries, then north to Elgin and Inverness." Today the Strathspey Steam Railway operates from Aviemore to The Boat with a branch line that will soon be extended to Grantown.

All this took me back to days of yore, teeing off to the sound of a steam train chuffing past the 4th fairway. I've got to say, Boat of Garten is one of the most delightful heathland courses I've encountered! The view from the clubhouse over the 1st and 2nd fairways to the Cairngorm Mountains with craggy Lairig Ghru and the northern corries of Braeriach is incomparable, the quintessence of golf in the Scottish Highlands. The turf is not unlike links,

rather nibbled as if by sheep or deer and delightful to play over.

The Boat's course sails over rippling fairways surrounded by heather, gorse and silver birch trees. You could grow attached to a course like this; it's so peaceful and the vistas are so gorgeous. Then there's the 'toot toot' of the next train chuffing into Boat of Garten Station before the peace settles in again and you're in Sylvain silence. The only thing you've got to think about is your golf and the Boat's range of challenging holes such as the 5th or the outstanding 12th – and oh yes, the incomparable 18th will keep you engaged every shot of the way.

The Speyside Golf Whisky Trail is quite unique, possibly one of the best ways to encounter Scotland, or at least this particularly enchanting valley. Now that I'm a malt whisky aficionado, I'm not the biggest fan of blends but the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail is a blend of some of the best aspects of Scotland, well worth savouring with a round or two - either on or off the golf course.

David J Whyte is one of Scotland's best-known golf travel writers and photographers. Watch his videos and read further articles on the Home of Golf and many other top destinations by visiting www.go-golf.tv

To help prepare yourself for your own personal golf and whisky expedition, here are some toasts you really ought to have under your belt.

The Selkirk Grace

Some hae meat, and canna eat,
And some wad eat that want it;
But we hae meat, and we can eat
And sae the Lord be thankit.

Written by Robert Burns, this is a grace offered before meals at Scottish gatherings.

Here's Tae Us

Here's tae us
Wha's like us
Damn few,
And they're a' deid
Mair's the pity!

Speyside, The Easy Way

We booked the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail via their preferred tour operator, Golf Vacation Scotland (in no relation and not to be confused with this magazine) who know the area intimately - Neil Robertson, one of their directors, spent years as an assistant golf professional at nearby Duff House Royal Golf Club - and they will organise and pre-book all the added extras to make your tour especially memorable. Prices for a few days 'Stay&Play' are a fraction of what you pay on any of Scotland's 'Grand Tours' such as the Open Championship courses – depending, of course on how much whisky you consume.

David J Whyte travelled on the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail with Scottish-based tour operator, Golf Vacation Scotland – visit www.golfvacationscotland.com