

Playing around

GOLF and whisky. What a marvellous idea, I mused, sitting in the bar at the Sunninghill Hotel in Elgin, nursing a 10-year-old Benromach, a lively little number with the flavours of dark chocolate, melted butter and sticky toffee pudding. As it swished down my throat, as if by magic this mouth-watering mélange transformed into a finish of sweet fruit – with a hint of Reggae Reggae sauce? I was getting the hang of this whisky-tasting business. “Can I try a 15-year-old?” I asked Sunninghill’s barman, who was keeping me right on

David J. Whyte takes an ungainly saunter along the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail, sampling the spirit of this scenic part of Grampian and the Highlands

the best sniffers to sample. “This is one of my favourites,” Donald told me, pouring a golden globule of Glenrothes, a drop I was hitherto unfamiliar with. Ahhh, nectar. When you’re a neophyte whisky-sampler like me, you need a bit of guidance as to what’s what. There’s nothing like a good education.

ELGIN

I was on the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail and things were looking decidedly rosy. First up was Elgin Golf Club, itself a bit of an education. With some of the best par fours in Scotland, from start to finish, you are stretched. The first and second are cracking holes and if you roll on either green in two, you’ve done well. There’s a bit of a breather on the third then it ramps it up again at the fourth. What makes Elgin so good is there’s a tremendous balance to the round. You are tested for two or three holes, given a break, then it comes right back at you again – just to make sure you’re paying attention. Tremendous. This is one well put together golf course that will test the best.

MORAY

Equally bold is Moray Old, golf by the sea as it should be, an unadulterated links laid out by Old Tom Morris, in 1889. I don’t think the godfather of golf had much to do here. Most of the work was already done. This is as natural a golf terrain as you’ll find. High dunes and banks of crusty gorse are peppered with pot bunkers and all joined up with those whippet-fast, rippling fairways. Whether you’re a good, bad or indifferent golfer, it doesn’t matter. Old Moray throws it all at you anyway with the added oomph of ever-present breezes. The most inspiring holes are, to my mind, on the homeward stretch with views across the curvaceous beach back to town. The 18th, in fact, is among the most lauded finishing holes in the game. You need your best drive of the day to reach the safe zone, an area of calm amidst heaving humps and bumps to help the ultimate cause: to hit the upside-down-flowerpot green. What a hole. Par this and celebrate in the clubhouse with a drop of Moray Golf Club’s very own bottled malt – a 10-year-old Macallan, I believe. You see, I was paying attention.

THE TRAIL IN DETAIL

My golfing buddies and I were treating ourselves to the supreme quality on offer in this part of Scotland. We used to go abroad for a spring golfing break, either to Portugal or Spain. Turkey’s a bit far – though we’ve been there at the back end for longer stays. Exploring closer to home is becoming increasingly

Far left: Boat of Garten Golf Club

Left: Benromach Distillery gift shop

Below: Grantown Golf Club. Photographs: Linksland



Benromach Distillery



in Speyside



attractive, especially with offers such as the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail. You can reach Speyside in an hour or two from most parts of Scotland, taking out the fuss of flying. And the variety and standard of golf on offer, in terms of intrinsic quality, outmatches most of what you find abroad anyway. OK, maybe you aren’t guaranteed sunshine, but hey – we’re golfers. Who cares? The Speyside Golf Whisky Trail includes Moray Old, Elgin, Forres, Grantown-on-Spey and Boat of Garten golf clubs, along with the world-renowned whisky shop, Gordon & MacPhail, in Elgin, and the Benromach distillery at Forres, the smallest distillery in Speyside and surely one of the most informative tours. Johnstons of Elgin – the “name behind the names” such as Louis Vuitton, Burberry, Hugo Boss and Chanel – also offers golfers a special VIP mill tour. This is ideal for non-golfers as well, although, if you favour a bit of sartorial quality, this is a great place to shop. Accommodation options are equally appealing with three well-appointed hotels spread neatly across the region. Select the accommodation of your choice, contact them and they’ll organise your entire break. You can reach any of the golf courses quite comfortably from any of the hotels. Prices for a three-day break on the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail start from £240, including three nights’ B&B and three rounds of golf, while a five-day break starts at £395. Vouchers for VIP tours of the Benromach distillery and Johnstons of Elgin are included, as is 10% discount at Gordon & MacPhail, plus two-

for-one entry at Benromach. Benromach visitors also receive £3 off purchases of £25 or more.

THE BOAT

I think it’s fair to say the Boat of Garten is one of the best heathland courses in the UK. The view from the clubhouse over the first and second fairways to the Cairngorms is an inspiration from the start. But the Boat wastes no time in throwing you in at the deep end. By the fourth, the fifth and especially the dogleg sixth, you realise in no way is it going to be plain sailing. Then the “toot toot” of a steam train chuffing into Boat of Garten Station settles your nerves and you remember it’s only a game. The Strathspey steam railway passes right by the Boat, a disarming reminder of a gentler era.

GRANTOWN-ON-SPEY

Some 15 minutes east of the Boat is Grantown-on-Spey Golf Club. You could conceivably play both courses in a day. Grantown’s is one of those delightful dalliances. The first half-dozen holes serve as warmers, open and fairly easy on the driver, then you cross the road to the seventh and its red-squirrel country, tree-lined and heathery with interesting changes in elevation – the ninth a great case in point. The closing section is different again. So you’re always on your toes at Grantown, a friendly club that matches the gracious little granite village of the same name. Be sure to book in for a meal as the caterer at Grantown serves some of the best clubhouse fare I’ve ever stumbled upon.

FORRES

The final outing of our five-round stay was at Forres Golf Club, a delightful heathland/parkland combination, ideal for players of all persuasions. Each hole is different – from the diving-board drop at the first to the thought-provoking, risk-and-reward 16th. Forres is not long by today’s standards but there is a wealth of intricacy and, to be honest, during a week of steady, sometimes stretching golf, Forres comes as a



Moray Old Golf Course. Photograph: Linksland

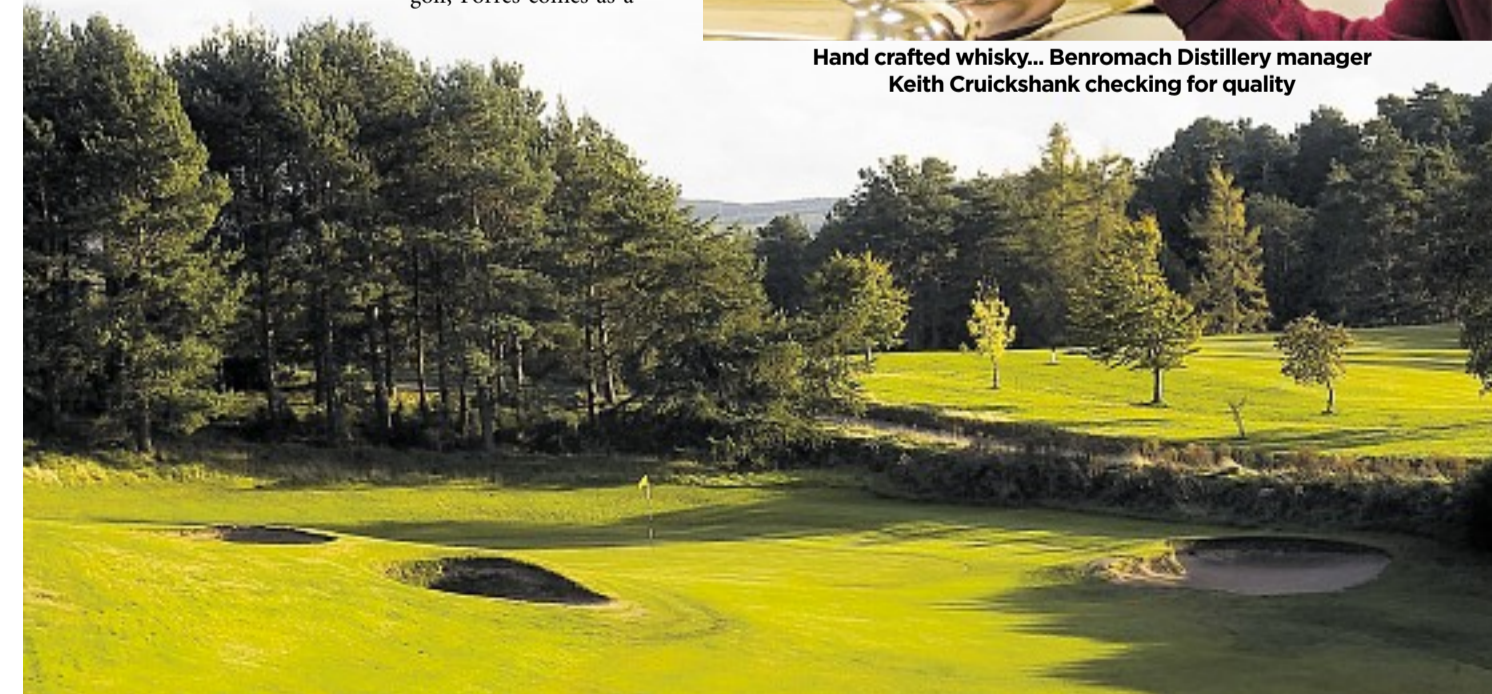


Elgin Golf Club.

Photograph: David J Whyte / Linksland



Hand crafted whisky... Benromach Distillery manager Keith Cruickshank checking for quality



Forres Golf Club. Photograph: Linksland

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