



The
Speyside
Golf Whisky Trail

Story and Photography by David J. Whyte



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Scotland

is famous for many things but whisky and golf are two of the highlights. David J. Whyte takes a slightly meandering doddle along Speyside's Golf Whisky Trail, sampling the 'spirit' of this unique part of Scotland



Speyside is a serene and secluded part of the Scottish Highlands punctuated with dramatic scenery, superb golf courses and around 28 of the world's most famous whisky distilleries! "Golf & Whisky! What a perfect combination!" I mused as I sat in the bar at the Garth Hotel in Grantown-on-Spey, a charming little hostelry in an equally delightful Highland village of the same name. I was nursing a 10-year-old Benromach with the flavours of dark 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.

The Boat

That afternoon I'd played the Boat of Garten Golf Club, a fine introduction to the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail. 'The Boat' is surely one of the most delightful heathland courses in the UK, high up in the hills and high on many people's list of favourites! The view from the clubhouse over the 1st and 2nd fairways to the Cairngorm Mountains is to-die-for! The turf is not unlike links as if nibbled by sheep, rough and ready and crisp to play off. The Boat navigates its way over rippling fairways edged by heather, gorse and silver birch. It offers an easy Par 3 to start but wastes no time throwing you in the deep end on holes such as the 4th 5th, & 6th.



The 12th, 16th and 18th are exceptional on the back nine – but they're all exceptional holes here in an area that is scenically stunning – not to mention the peace. Then there's the 'toot toot' of a steam train chuffing into Boat of Garten Station before the peace settles in again and you're left in Sylvain tranquillity. Bliss!

Grantown-on-Spey

The idyllic Speyside village of Grantown-on-Spey is only 10 miles away so you could conceivably play The Boat & Grantown in a day. Grantown is one of those delightful dalliances where it doesn't really matter how you play, you're going to enjoy it! The first half dozen holes serve as warmers, open and fairly



easy on the drives. Cross the road to the 7th and it's a different prospect, tree-lined and heathery with marked changes in elevation.

This is an exciting section where you'll find out just how straight you can hit that driver. Murdie's View is the 9th; a 275-yard Par 4 so most will have a pop at the green from the panoramic high tee and quite a few roll on. One thing to add about the Grantown experience; be sure to stop for a meal at the clubhouse as it offers some of the best catering we've encountered.

Elgin

My next golf outing was on Elgin Golf Club. I reckon this much under-rated course has some of the best Par 4's in the country. Right from the start you are stretched! It really is a surprise (or at least it was to me) how good this course is, one of the unsung heroes of Highland golf that everyone needs to try. There are eight Par 4's over 400 yards starting with the 1st and 2nd. You get a bit of a breather on the 3rd but its shape doesn't make it an easy green to find in 2. Elgin measures 6449 yards with Par of 69 and Standard Scratch of 71 so that gives you an idea of the degree of difficulty. Good golfers will definitely want to take this one on!

Moray

One of Scotland's most laudable link courses is Moray Old, golf-by-the-sea as it should be, an unadulterated track laid out by Old Tom Morris way back in 1889. (I don't think he had much designing to do here!) This is as natural a golf terrain as you will find. The Old plays out towards Covesea Lighthouse before turning at the 12th, tracing the beach back and catching the full effect of tempest and tide. The 18th is considered one of the finest finishing holes in Scotland. You might want to consider staying for the day as Moray's New course is as good in many ways except it's tighter with smaller greens. Their Day Ticket is only £65 so a real bargain



Forres

In terms of golfing variety, the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail presents an eclectic mix. 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 Open Championship winners, 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.

Where to Stay

The Speyside Golf Whisky Trail offers three different hotel options. You could spread your tour and stay in all three although any of them makes a good base for touring. The Garth in Grantown is really relaxed, a typical Highland hostelry where you'll rub shoulders with tourists from every part of the world. The Garth, popular with walkers, fisherman and golfers and serves exceedingly fine meals. In Elgin, Sunninghill Hotel is renowned for its food, nothing pretentious, just good, hearty helpings and excellent service. It is the ideal base if you want to wander out and explore Elgin's pubs, clubs and visitor sites, as the hotel is only 5 minutes walk from the town centre. The Knockomie Hotel in Forres is more upmarket and suited to couples or groups looking for that touch of added luxury. Their whisky bar is the perfect place to size up a fine variety of single malt whiskies before dinner and retire to them afterwards.

Worth Sampling

Talking of whisky, there is one shop 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. Bespoke tastings can be organised in Gordon & McPhail's shop for groups by booking in advance :

Tel: 01343 545110

or email retail@gordonandmacphail.com

One of the best whisky distillery tours we found was Benromach Distillery in Forres, the smallest distillery in Speyside, 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: 01309 675968 – email: info@gordonandmacphail.com). You can also 'Bottle Your Own Benromach' at the distillery, label it and cork it. The Speyside Golf Whisky Trail is quite unique, possibly one of the best ways to encounter Scotland, or at least this particularly valley, which has got to be one of the finest. When it comes to whisky, I'm not a fan of blends but the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail is a blend of some of the finest aspects of Scotland, well worth savouring with a round or two – either on or off the golf course.

Speyside, The Easy Way

We booked the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail via the preferred golf tour operator, Golf Vacation Scotland who know the area intimately. (www.golfvacationscotland.com Tel:01786 433808 or emailtours@golfvacationscotland.com)

