



The 15th at Boat of Garten, a Highland delight lined by silver birch and carpeted with heather and broom

PHOTOGRAPH: DAVID J WHYTE

## 'It's no surprise to see woolly-hatted groups from overseas lapping up this chilly wonder'

► Another shortie at just 5,710 yards, this mix of parkland and woodland gave the world Bobby Cruickshank, one of the first British players to ply his trade as a professional in the United States, notably losing a play-off in the 1923 US Open to the legendary Bobby Jones. An irate oystercatcher makes the first hole one to remember, yip-yip-yipping and blindsiding me as I unknowingly wander close to its nest. I plough on, the engrossing golf calming my nerves. The parkland sections that bookend the woody middle are more forgiving than the Boat, allowing for minor directional inconsistencies, but from 7 to 12 accuracy is required from tee to green if you're to stay out of the trees. The ninth and finest hole, Murdies View, could grace any top course, an elevated tee looking down on a rhomboid green at the foot of a corridor of pine trees. At 275 yards, you have no option but to unleash your biggest, straightest drive. Heavenly, as is the mountain hare terrine I scoff back at the splendidly appointed 19th hole.

By contrast, the Old Course at Moray Golf Club in Lossiemouth is a wind-blasted, hummocky and mischief-ridden trial made tougher still by the comings and goings of Tornado jets at the RAF base up the road. Often deafening, in time the roar becomes semi-addictive, and has you craning your neck every 10 minutes to marvel at the machinery. After a struggle on the outward nine I learn to loosen my swing and take whatever these majestic links care to throw at me – which is plenty. Though

easily on a par with the likes of Prestwick and Machrihanish, Moray GC spoils its members with two epic links – the 6,995-yard Old and 6,008-yard New – for less than £500 a year, a deal I've yet to hear bettered. The clubhouse and welcome are matchless, too, so it's no surprise to see plenty of woolly-hatted groups from overseas lapping up this chilly wonder, regardless of the din. There's an encouragingly large contingent of women members, which clearly shouldn't be worth mentioning but nonetheless is.

It's a good deal quieter along the coast at Elgin Golf Club, a placid, manicured and lush heathland course measuring 6,449 yards. It makes the perfect complement to Moray GC, leading many local golfers to join both clubs. Goosed after Moray Old, though, my A, B and C games are absent at Elgin, yet the course proves a joy – high praise in golf.

While you're in Elgin it would be remiss to pass up a visit to Gordon & MacPhail, a first-class food and drink emporium on South Street that houses a fine whisky shop stocking 300 or so brands, while the town is also home to Johnstons Cashmere, a tastefully high-end shop and heritage centre where you can watch the goats' wool travel from its angel hair natural state through to its culmination as a luxury fabric coveted by Louis Vuitton and his cronies. And should your interest in uisge beatha be piqued at Gordon & MacPhail, the firm's Benromach distillery is a short drive from Elgin, outside Forres. Endorsed congruently by the broadcaster and whisky aficionado, Tom Morton,

and incongruously by interior design's favourite flouncing fop, Laurence Llewelyn-Bowen, Speyside's smallest distillery earns the adjective "boutique", employing just two distillers.

But it's the golf I'm here for, and before returning home there is the delightful heathland and parkland course at Forres Golf Club to savour. A modest 6,236-yard par 70 and swarming with firs, it's less typically Highland than the Boat or Grantown yet provides a stiff test of golfing stamina, not to mention more defensive oystercatcher yippery. Why do these birds insist on nesting on fairways? Happily, the affable club pro, Sandy Aird, gives us a warmer welcome at the ninth green, plying us with pop and chocolate to sustain our wearying bodies.

You can play golf anywhere you please, from Alicante to Anstruther, but the oxygen-rich Speyside scenery takes the game up a level. It might be chilly, but that's why they invented jumpers. ■

### GETTING THERE AND WHERE TO STAY

Tour operator Golf Vacation Scotland can tailor the Speyside Golf Whisky Trail to your needs, with prices from £295pp for three nights in a three-star hotel plus two rounds of golf. Visit [www.golfvacationscotland.com](http://www.golfvacationscotland.com) or call 01786 433808. To read more about the trail and watch videos of the courses, visit [www.go-golf.tv](http://www.go-golf.tv). For general information on Speyside visit [www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com).