

FOOD&DRINK SCOTCH WHISKY

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# Scots don't need an excuse to party, but May is set to become the mother *and* father of all parties – it's Whisky Month. Bill Mackintosh heads to Speyside to discover more...

## IT'S ONE OF THE WORLD'S FAVOURITE DRINKS

– and now the world has been invited to join in on a month-long celebration of the 'water of life'. As part of the Scottish government's Homecoming Scotland year, the whole of May has been given over to whisky. And you can see why when you learn that whisky brings in £20 million a year to Scotland, from thousands of aficionados visiting some of the 100 or so distilleries scattered across the landscape – and that's not counting the billions earned in taxes and exports. Forget the Hogmanay celebrations, Whisky Month will be a unique occasion, a rare excuse for a party with 30,000 friends.

It's going to be some party. There will be more than 30 events across the whisky regions of Scotland – the Highlands, Speyside, Lowlands, Islay and Campbeltown – and although the emphasis will be on tasting the national drink, visitors will also have the chance to experience gourmet foods, scenic walks, golf and a whole series of other linked events.

The month has the enthusiastic support of the whisky and tourism industries. It is seen,

understandably, as an ideal opportunity to boost visitor numbers at a time of uncertainty over the economy.

Hence it has the backing of Scotland's First Minister, Alex Salmond, who told *Voyager*: "Whisky is an ambassador for the quality and distinction of Scottish produce and Whisky Month presents a fantastic opportunity for us to celebrate Scotland's famous national drink. With its wealth of distilleries and its scenic majesty, I hope that thousands of new visitors will join us for a dram this year."

There are three major festivals: the Spirit of Speyside that has doubled to 10 days and includes dinners, dances, and distillery tours – even some to previously unopened distilleries. Second is Feis Ile, the legendary Islay spree that attracts fans of the pungent drams from across the globe. Third is a new attraction to whisky tourism – the Spirit of the West, a conglomeration of hotels, restaurants, distilleries and visitor attractions that run along the west coast and its most inspiring scenery, from Campbeltown to Skye. ▶



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## ON THE WHISKY TRAIL

### SPIRIT OF SPEYSIDE FESTIVAL

1-10 May. Nearest airport: Aberdeen (2hr drive). [www.spiritofspeyside.com](http://www.spiritofspeyside.com)

### MACLEAN'S MALT WHISKY TOUR OF SCOTLAND

7pm, 16 May. £5/£3. King's College, Aberdeen. +44 (0) 1224 641 122, [www.abdn.ac.uk/word](http://www.abdn.ac.uk/word)

### ARDMORE DISTILLERY HOMECOMING

4-5 May. £30. Nearest airport: Aberdeen (1hr drive) +44 (0) 1464 831 213 [www.ardmorewhisky.com](http://www.ardmorewhisky.com)

### ISLAY MALT & MUSIC FESTIVAL

23-31 May. Prices vary. Nearest airport: Glasgow (4hr drive). +44 (0) 1496 302413, [www.islayfestival.org](http://www.islayfestival.org)

### GLENMORANGIE WHISKY WEEKENDS

8-9, 15-16, 22-23 May. +44 (0) 1862 871 671, [www.theglenmorangiehouse.com](http://www.theglenmorangiehouse.com)

### TALISKER WHISKY TASTINGS

7pm, 9, 16, 23 and 30 May. Dunvegan Castle. +44 (0) 1470 521 206, [www.dunvegancastle.com](http://www.dunvegancastle.com)

### TALISKER DISTILLERY

£5 for normal tour, including money-off voucher. £15 for tasting tour. +44 (0) 1478 614308, [www.discovering-distilleries.com/talisker](http://www.discovering-distilleries.com/talisker)

### HIGHLAND PARK OPEN WEEKEND

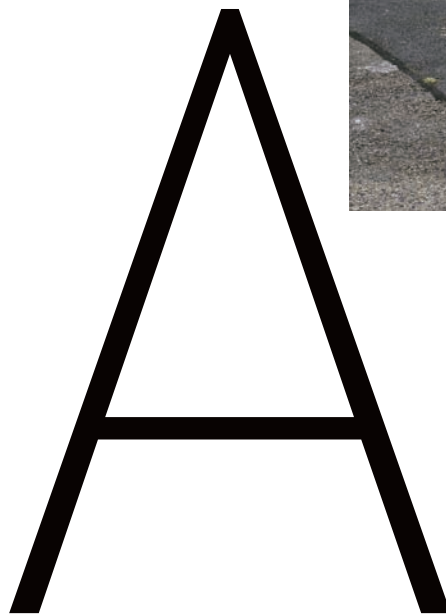
23-24 May. Free. Tour normally £6, or £35 for connoisseur's. +44 (0) 1856 874 619, [www.highlandpark.co.uk](http://www.highlandpark.co.uk)

### AUCHENTOSHAN DISTILLERY

Standard tour £4.50. VIP tour £18/£23. Manager's tour and masterclass £35/£45. +44 (0) 1389 878 561, [www.auchentoshan.co.uk](http://www.auchentoshan.co.uk)



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**ADMITTEDLY, I'M PASSIONATE ABOUT WHISKY**, but even I would be stretched to take in everything, such as the diversity of events. I'm hoping to visit Speyside, a region that runs the length of the River Spey on the eastern side of the Highlands, which is home to more than half of Scotland's distilleries. It is easily reached from Aberdeen airport. The celebrations begin at the Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival on 1 May.

Celebrating its 10th anniversary during Homecoming, the festival has doubled in size for 2009, extending its programme over 10 days and offering specialist whisky tours, master classes and tastings, and gourmet food events at distilleries. For families, activities combine whisky and leisure

Above left: Whisky Month is 10 years old, but many of the drinks will be a bit older

Above right: The Talisker distillery is worth the journey to the remote Isle of Skye

to create a variety of entertainment, scenic walks, golf, sport and exclusive retail opportunities. The festival finale on Saturday, 9 May, 'The Spirit of Speyside', embraces the music, dance and song of

the region in a spectacular event on the idyllic banks of the River Spey, at Aberlour. Headlined by renowned Scottish band, Capercaillie, the entertainment will come to a dramatic close with a stunning display of fireworks.

Head back into Aberdeen and learn more about whisky at MacLean's Malt Whisky Tour of Scotland on Saturday, 16 May, part of the University of Aberdeen's Word Festival 2009. Famous whisky writer Charles MacLean will talk about his new book *MacLean's Malt Whisky Handbook* and explore the flavour and character of every malt whisky distilled in Scotland.

*The festival has doubled in size for 2009, extending its programme over 10 days*

You could also take the opportunity to enter Ardmore Distillery – rarely open to the public – where you can experience a bespoke tour and whisky tasting session.

Celebrating the spirits of the Highlands, Islay and Campbeltown on 16 and 17 May is Spirit of the West, a brand new festival that takes place in the stunning grounds of Inveraray Castle. Whisky tasting, food sampling and cookery demonstrations will run alongside historical trails, fashion shows, music, arts ▶

# Many make the return pilgrimage to Islay year after year

and crafts and golfing activities with a lively *ceilidh* giving you a chance to enjoy a few drams. A short hop from Inveraray is Islay, and if you haven't booked for the Islay Malt & Music Festival from 23-31 May, hurry before it's too late. Heavily subscribed by Islayphiles, many make the return pilgrimage year after year. 'Feis Ile' features a week-long programme of events at Islay's Distilleries, but it is much more



iconic Dunvegan Castle for an unforgettable evening with Talisker Distillery. Heading further north to Orkney, Scotland's most northerly distillery, Highland Park, flings open its doors for a free, exclusive open weekend on 23 and 24 May.

In the Lowlands of Scotland there are plenty of opportunities to sample a dram and get a flavour of Whisky Month. Visit Auchentoshan's newly

refurbished £500,000 Visitors Centre near Glasgow (just 20 minutes from the city centre and 10 minutes from the airport) and make sure you stop at Edinburgh's Scotch Whisky Experience for 'Enthusiasm for Scotch' and The Diageo Claipe Vidiz Scotch Whisky Collection – at 3,384 bottles, the world's largest collection of whiskies – a 'must see' for whisky fans and novices alike.

There is also a fascinating exhibition entitled From the Vaults: Whisky and the Scots. Held at the National Archives of Scotland's West Register House, it has several key treasures that document whisky in Scotland including: the first mention of whisky

in Scotland and memorabilia of Robert Burns's time as an excise man.

And finally, if you're not all whiskied out, there's *Whisky Galore – A Musical!* featuring the classic true story of the ship the SS Politician running aground on a tiny Hebridean Island and dropping 50,000 cases of whisky. It runs from 15 May to 17 October at the Pitlochry Festival theatre. 🍷



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than that. Tastings, discos and the wonderfully named Cloutie Dumpling Ceilidh and Islay itself all give Feis Ile a unique feel.

Apart from the set-piece festivals, May also brings visitors the chance to head up to the Highlands where you could incorporate whisky tasting with a weekend break. Book a Glenmorangie Whisky Weekend while visiting the home of Glenmorangie in Tain, or head to Skye's

Above: The distinctive stills of the Laphroaig Distillery on Islay

Top right: The Isle of Skye's Dunvegan Castle is the evocative site for a Whisky Month tasting event this May

## STILL ON THE WHISKY TRAIL



### SCOTCH WHISKY EXPERIENCE & THE DIAGEO CLAIPE VIDIZ SCOTCH WHISKY COLLECTION

Edinburgh. £7.50. Family ticket £16.50. +44 (0) 131 220 0441, [www.scotchwhiskyexperience.co.uk](http://www.scotchwhiskyexperience.co.uk)

### FROM THE VAULTS: WHISKY AND THE SCOTS

7 May-26 June. Edinburgh. Free. +44 (0) 131 535 1400, [www.nas.gov.uk](http://www.nas.gov.uk)

### WHISKY GALORE – A MUSICAL!

Pitlochry Festival Theatre. £12 -£23.50. Nearest airport: Edinburgh (1hr 30 min drive) +44 (0) 1796 484626, [www.pitlochry.org.uk](http://www.pitlochry.org.uk)

### GENERAL INFORMATION

[www.visitscotland.com](http://www.visitscotland.com)

For a full listing of events in the Whisky Month programme visit [www.homecomingscotland2009.com/whiskymonth](http://www.homecomingscotland2009.com/whiskymonth)



Whisky writer Bill Mackintosh is chairman of Glasgow's Whisky Club and a passionate advocate of Scotch whisky. He believes in the responsible drinking of single malts and prefers to take his dram in a glass, although he has been known to pour it over porridge, or mix it with mussels.