

# WHISKY

Magazine

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## *The real Islay spirit*

Brian Palmer, Whisky Magazine's first ever tee-total contributor, reveals the Ileach view of Islay's famed annual whisky celebration

It's a fact not lost on many visitors to Islay that those of us who live here have the 'benefit' of being surrounded by malt whisky distilleries, some of the most famous in the world, and that it is possible to meet with a manager or two in the supermarket on a Saturday morning. An Islay malt whisky aficionado's dream.

And every May - or at least the last week of it - for the past three years, ever-increasing numbers have descended upon this small Western Scottish isle to partake of the island hospitality and of the distilleries' spirit (in both senses of the word).

I'm sure the residents of Speyside feel much the same as we do. The prosperity of the distilleries on Islay and Jura is an integral part of the island economy. Not just because of the employment they provide, but because of the visitor numbers referred to above. Many of the visitors to the Islay Festival spend inordinate amounts of money. And the local economy is the better for it. And the personalities created by these distilleries - and vice-versa (I'm thinking of Stuart Thompson, Iain Henderson and Jim McEwan to name a few) - are the islands' ambassadors across the globe, a fact corroborated by the numbers arriving on our shores from all four corners of the world. That those living on Islay and Jura are not first in the queue to visit on each day of the Islay Whisky Festival should not be regarded as disinterest. Those arriving for the Fest generally have only a week to sate their 'thirst'. We have the other 51.

As a member of the Ileach staff (Islay's local newspaper) and the progenitor of [www.islaywhiskyfestival.com](http://www.islaywhiskyfestival.com), I was fortunate to attend every day of the 2002 Islay Festival;

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all the tours, all the extra-curricular activity, and was treated like royalty by the distillery staff and managers. And I felt very humble because I've known these people for many years and have been involved in the whisky part of the festival since its inception three years ago. And while it seems right and proper that they treat visitors and writers to the islands and their distilleries in this way, it is an honour that they treated me the same way. And I don't even drink!


I met several visitors to the Festival and writers from this magazine at a variety of events and places throughout the week. They were all having as much fun as I was and the PLOWED Society of America (a bunch of self-styled whisky connoisseurs - their words, not mine) were even moved to place a 'Thank You' advertisement in our newspaper thanking the distilleries, and the people of Islay and Jura for their wonderful hospitality. As I write this, there is another letter sitting in the Ileach Editor's in-tray stating how much they enjoyed the 2002 Festival, having attended all three years' worth.

That almost every event was booked to the hilt, and in many cases oversubscribed, well in advance of the opening day, that Ardbeg sold out its Candlelit Dinner inside half-an-hour, that Iain Henderson's tours were booked morning and afternoon for a whole week, that Bruichladdich, Bunnahabhain and Ardbeg could successfully promote bottlings only available from the distilleries during the festival, shows just how highly valued the Islay and Jura experience is. Even Guinness UDV's Port Ellen Maltings had booked out nine tours throughout the Monday afternoon before the month of May had even begun.



That the distilleries sold Islay and Jura well before they started to sell their own product, and that Caol Ila was seen to be important enough to be elevated from the status of Guinness UDV workhorse to being the proud purveyor of 12-year-old, 18-year-old and cask strength single malt bottlings is not only a feather in the cap for manager Billy Stitchell, but yet another for Islay.

The final night - The Condenser's Club Party - at Bunnahabhain showed the managers of these distilleries to be not only personalities (however reluctantly, in some cases) and/or comedians in their own right, but to be the best of friends despite being the fiercest of competitors. They are indeed excellent ambassadors for the islands and made me not only proud to be a friend, but proud of the island on which I live and work. Roll on 2003.


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