Sipping through the Hebrides

TEXT AND PHOTOS BY BILL ANDO

Mixing sailboats, islands, and single malt scotch whiskies—is this the recipe for heaven?

Sailing the islands usually conjures up visions of the Caribbean or the South Pacific. Sailing the Hebrides, off Scotland's west coast, shifts the paradigm. These islands—the Inner Hebrides are close by, the Outer Hebrides are sixteen miles or more farther west—offer views of the rugged glacial-carved landscape accented by the legendary Scottish Highlands rising to the north.

Eda Frandsen travels between the Oban and Talisker distilleries; (opposite) Diageo roving nose Iain Cockburn checks a single malt's color during a nosing.

Castles that were located strategically when built centuries ago now stand as visitor attractions or simply as waypoint markers through the islands. Watches are kept for puffins flying low over the water, eagles flying about the cliffs, dolphins taking a breath, otters at play, and whales and basking sharks. Oh, the water's a bit cold, even in July, but there's usually wind, the natives are friendly, and sailing with the Classic Malts Cruise ensures there will be ample drams of warming single malt scotch whisky.

Every year crews of no more than one hundred boats are afforded the privilege of taking part in the Classic Malts Cruise. In 2005, ninety-one sailboats flying the flags of eleven nations converged on the port city of Oban, on the rim of the Scottish Highlands and the "Gateway to the Isles." It was time for the Classic Malts Cruise.

The Classic Malts are a combined branding of six distilleries owned by beverage giant Diageo and represent the differing tastes and characters of single malt whiskies from each of Scotland's whisky-producing regions. Fortunately, three of the distilleries are conveniently located in the Hebrides, on the Isle of Skye, on Islay, and in Oban.

Organized with the assistance of the Clyde Cruising Club, the first Classic Malts Cruise in 1994 attracted twenty-five boats, predominantly of Scottish registry. Word spread that this was a good time, and perhaps the only time to credibly learn the size of a dram and what the term nosing means, all the while enjoying the visceral and factual pleasures of sailing through one of nature's most daring, yet civilized, archipelagos.

From top to bottom: The thirteenth-century Castle Tioram; the six Classic Malt labels lined up on *Eda Frandsen*'s taffrail; flat water, good wind aboard *Little Minch*

The first official function of a Classic Malts Cruise is the welcome party held in the courtyard of the Oban Distillery, near the wharf in the heart of the town that grew up around the distillery. More than four hundred sailors were greeted with a dram of fourteen-year-old Oban single malt. A lavish buffet of Scottish beef, salmon, and seafood was finished off with local raspberries and strawberries and a rousing ceilidh (pronounced kay-lee), a party along the lines of a U.S. hoedown.

One of the participating boats was *Eloise*. Although it flew a British ensign, the forty-three-foot sloop was sailed by Walter Cavegn and five members of the Whisky and Cigar Clubof Basel, Switzerland. "It was th club's fifth anniversary," says Cavegn. "We wanted to do something special."

From top to bottom: A gull flies toward landfall at colorful Tobermory; Jamie Robinson checks the sail trim aboard *Eda Frandsen*; a panorama of Highland lochs unfolds.

The following day the boats headed off to the next port of call, the remote Talisker Distillery at Loch Harport on the Isle of Skye, eighty miles to the northwest. Setting their own itineraries between predetermined stops at the next two distilleries, sailors enjoyed the pleasures of the Scottish summer and visits to quiet, secluded anchorages or the islands' rustic and storied settlements. The three-day sail delivered some fickle weather. "We had nice winds, sometime from the wrong direction, but that's sailing," says Cavegn.

To gain some perspective on these somewhat sparsely populated islands, consider that Tobermory, the main town on Mull, the second-largest of the Inner Hebrides, has a population of about one thousand. The town harbors the Misnish Hotel. Its bold canary-yellow facade blends with the other brightly colored storefronts and houses that ring the harbor. The Caribbean-like colors brighten the northeast corner of the island in stark contrast to the gray hues of the granite and green foliage that add to the islands' adventurous bearing. The rainbow effect ashore is mimicked by the boats in the harbor, making it the most eye-catching fishing port on Scotland's west coast. The charming village is a convenient stop for sailors en route to Skye or on the trip south to the Lagavulin Distillery on Islay.

In Talisker, after distillery tours, a ceilidh broke out, as planned. Charlie Smith, Talisker's distillery manager, produced a bottle of specially vatted Talisker whisky commemorating the distillery's 175th anniversary and signed by Ellen McArthur, Britain's offshore sailing heroine. A charity auction produced a successful £700 bid by Joe Reynolds, a proud citizen of Glasgow, "where the world began," he says. Reynolds had noble plans for the bottle, which found a home aboard his Oyster 46 sloop *Clabbie Dubh*.

"I thought I'd give it to my daughter so she might bring it back to Talisker in twenty-five years and auction it again on its 200th anniversary," he says. Smith kindly gave him another bottle for drinking.

The following day boats made their way south, headed for a rendezvous at Lagavulin Distillery on Islay. One was *Eda Frandsen*, a sixty-year-old, fifty-six-foot, gaff-rigged wooden cutter. A well-found vessel, she is classic in the best sense of the word, making no concessions to modern sail-handling gear. Though it doesn't hurt her power, all her sails, save for the mainsheet, are sweated to their working shapes.

Noted whisky writer Helen Arthur appreciated the cruise's historical connection, especially aboard *Eda*. "It brings you closer to the heart of the whisky," Arthur observes. "You get the spirit of the pioneers in the 1700s who made the whisky with local ingredients and materials. They would have had to row or sail to get their product to market."

Single malts are the product of only one distillery. Each whisky possesses a unique character influenced by factors such as the peatiness of the malt, the size and shape of the copper stills, the wood cask used to mature the whisky, and even the local climate. Then, as the craftsmen at each distillery will proudly tell you, there's the individual distilling method.

A nosing (or tasting) involves four of the five senses: sight, smell, taste, and touch. Smell is decidedly the most tested, but sight provides the initial information. Pale or light gold whiskies indicate the use of aging casks refilled from previous batches. A more pronounced gold color is the sign a bourbon cask was employed. More reddish and brown tints indicate it was likely aged in a sherry cask.

Ceilidh action at Talisker (top); a cruiser leaving placid Loch Moidart

How Big Is a Dram?

The actual volume of a dram is buried quite deep in Scottish folklore. Talisker's distillery manager, Charlie Smith (above), explains the measure of a dram. "It depends on how well you know the person pouring, how much they like you, the host's generosity, the size of the glass," he says. The list goes on, but he makes clear that the size of a dram is a serendipitous measure, but certainly should be more than a wee bit.

The Classic Malts range from the pale gold Glenkinchie to Lagavulin's deep amber gold. "Young" whisky drinkers generally appreciate Oban, while experienced aficionados, such as Cavegn and Reynolds, tend to enjoy stronger malts. "Lagavulin is a little heavy tasting; I love that in a whisky," Cavegn says. "Oban is softer; Talisker is between the two." The Swiss sailor particularly enjoys a dram of Lagavulin "with a big Cuban cigar. Both are very strong tastes."

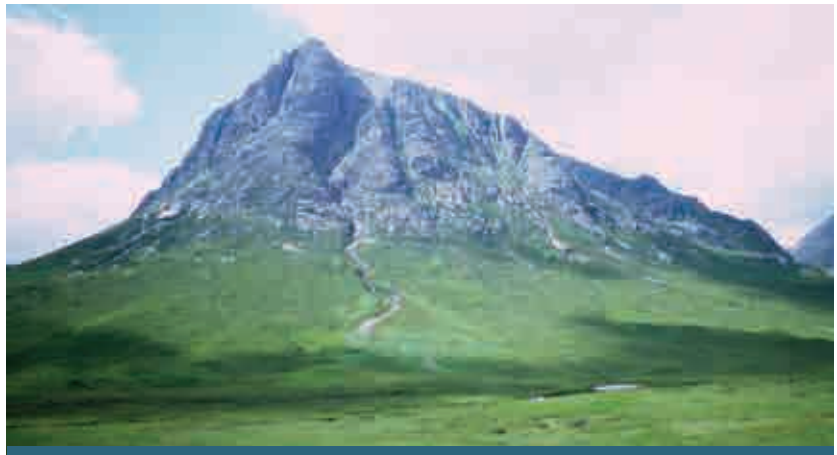
"I found the nosings very interesting," says Reynolds. "It lets you see just how complex a drink scotch really is." Inviting the crew from *Minerva* aboard, Reynolds hosted nine sailors and a roving nose (a single-malt savvy Diageo representative who helps those less familiar) for "a very enjoyable nosing at anchor in Canna."

Meanwhile, thirty-five miles to the east, Captain Jamie Robinson took in a deep breath and looked around. The burly Scot had found the spot where *Eda Frandsen* would spend the night. The crew dropped the anchor, which pierced the water's surface and rapidly headed for the soft bottom of Loch Moidart in the eastern Hebrides. Its waters surround Eilean Shona, which translates to "beautiful island" in Celtic. On its shore sits Castle Tioram, the ancestral home of the MacDonalds of Clanranald and, though in disrepair, one of the best surviving examples of a thirteenth-century Scottish castle. Surrounded by green hills thick with native oak and birch trees, Loch Moidart is generally thought to be one of the prettiest anchorages in all of Britain, and on this July evening, it's the perfect setting to taste the Classic Malts of Scotland.

With a bottle from each Classic Malt distillery, roving nose Iain Cockburn toured the group aboard *Eda Frandsen* through a nosing glass of each. He encouraged participants to "draw from your own experiences," to find a familiarity and distinction in the look, aroma, and taste of each individual malt. "What does the aroma remind you of?" he asked. Cockburn suggested adding a touch of water, which, even to a novice, subtly yet perceptibly enhanced the malt's character.

Seventy boats made it to the Lagavulin Distillery, on Islay, for the last official function of the cruise. The rest of the sailors were too busy enjoying summer with the Classic Malts in the Hebrides.

It was the sailing that attracted Bill Ando to the Classic Malts Cruise, resulting in his enjoyment of an occasional dram. He first sailed into Charlotte Harbor from Los Angeles aboard his thirty-seven-foot trimaran. Now he writes from his home in Dania Beach, Florida.



For more information about the Classic Malts Cruise, call World Cruising at +44 (0)1983 296060 or visit www.worldcruising.com. For more information about traveling to Scotland, go to www.visitscotland.com.