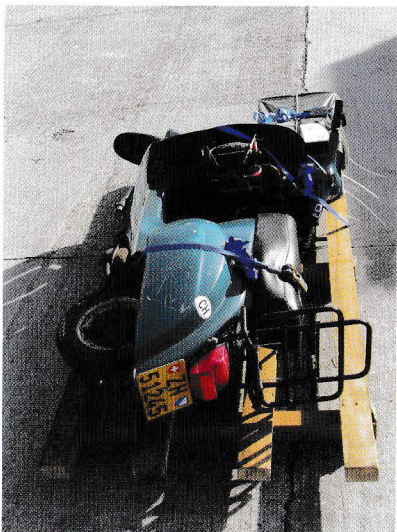


# chapter

# 1

*Freedom and whisky  
gang thegither! -  
Tak aff your dram!*

**Robert Burns**  
*The Author's Earnest Cry and Prayer*



## Arran and Campbeltown

I have come prepared for the worst in Scottish weather, being well acquainted with the Irish version of it, but today it is eerily calm and even sunny. Adding to the strangeness of the scene is the feeling that I am about to see my little green Vespa here at the truck depot outside Glasgow. I was told to ask for Bernie.

'Does someone called Bernie work here?'

'Well,' says the warehouseman with a quick glance at his colleagues, 'she's employed here, but I don't know if I'd say she works here.'

Hundreds of pallets ~~is~~ loaded with sacks of stuff that you would normally expect to see loaded onto pallets. They don't get many scooters, the warehouseman tells me after he checks with Bernie and brings the Vespa out on the forklift. It looks in good shape - or at least as good a shape as it was when I last saw it two weeks ago.

The warehouseman tells me of three Polish riders on Harleys that were here last month. 'Two weeks of solid rain. They didn't have a great holiday. One of them said by the end he found a fish in his pocket.'

'The weather's all right today, though,' I say, looking optimistically at the sky.

'Aye, been good for the last week or so, really nice,' he says. Then with a word of caution, 'But it's set to break.'

'Is it ever not set to break?'

'Er, no.'

I ask if I can leave the pallet there in the warehouse for three weeks, somewhere it won't be used, because I will need it again on the way back.

It wasn't easy finding a two-metre pallet. He says that it shouldn't be a problem. I mention that I'm going round the distilleries, and I might pick up something for their Christmas party in return. 'In that case, it shouldn't be a problem at all.'

By early afternoon, I am at the Ardrossan ferry terminal staring at the distant Isle of Arran with the occasional thoughts of 'What? I'm actually doing the trip?' starting to recur at progressively longer intervals. Soon, I know from previous journeys, that strange feeling will subside and scooting from camp to camp each day will begin to seem the norm, and normal life's routines appear another dimension entirely. For now, though, it's still a matter of, 'What? I'm here!'

The Isle of Arran stands out as a summitless green & purple shape across the serene Firth of Clyde. Wordsworth looked at the same view in 1833 and was moved to write one of his Scottish itinerary sonnets:

*Far and wide  
A plain below stretched seaward, while, descried  
Above sea-clouds, the Peaks of Arran rose;  
And, by that simple notice, the repose  
Of earth, sky, sea and air, was vivified.*

Photo: J. Patterson



Good old Wordsworth, I could hardly have put it better myself. The lady at the ticket office tells me off for missing my ferry. 'Yes, I was supposed to be here earlier, but as you can see my means of transport ...'

'We were waiting for you. We tried to phone you.'

They waited for me? Can you imagine those burly dockers out there waiting until the last moment for Ben? 'Aww, he's not coming - Give him another couple of minutes, he'll turn up - No sign yet - Give him a ring!' It is already 3 pm and since my ferry I have also missed another couple of sailings in between, which is not really the done thing. The lady kindly agrees to let me on, since they are not quite full, and relieved I ride on board.

I've noticed that the steering of the Vespa is a bit wobbly, perhaps because of all the stuff packed into the crate on the back. It'll just take a bit of getting used to. Must be careful not to be doing wheelies, though, unintentional ones at least. To tell the truth, it hasn't really got the power to do a wheelie. Vespa 50s were originally designed for short runs around town, I suppose, rather than thousand-mile treks across northern Scotland. People often ask me why I go around on a 50. There are bigger models, the 125, 150, even a 200 cc, any of which would be more suitable for long trips, but I don't have one of those and that's my answer.

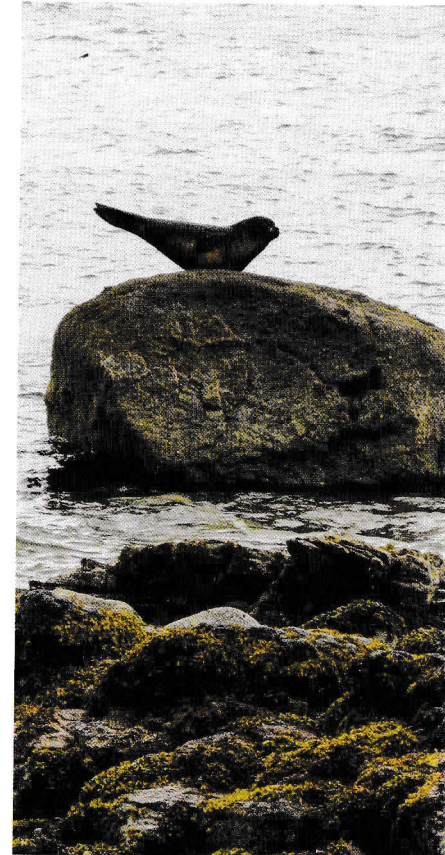
The 'Vespino' model of Vespa was brought out in 1963, and mine is one of the last of the original line, from 1979, with the small wheels and round headlight. Vespas were commissioned by Enrico Piaggio shortly after the Second World War and created by his inspired chief designer, Corradino

d'Ascanio. The intention was to offer an economical mode of transport that combined style with functionality, hence the elegant step-through unibody and simple two-stroke engine.

They say D'Ascanio was more at home designing planes and helicopters, and this might explain why he used the aeronautical single-fork method of attaching the front wheel. Some maintain that the Vespa engine actually comes from his design for a starter motor for aircraft. When d'Ascanio brought his first design for the new bike to his boss, Piaggio is said to have remarked 'Sembra una vespa!' - 'It looks like a wasp' - and the name stuck.

Because of the innovative step-through body, Vespas were the first motorbikes you could ride wearing a dress, or a kilt for that matter. I did think about buying myself a kilt for this journey, but after what the chap at the depot said back there about the fish in the pocket, I'm glad I didn't get around to that particular detail. Some things are definitely more amusing just to think about than to put into practice.

The ferry crosses the steely grey Firth of Clyde in an hour or so and arrives at Brodick just as the showers start. Ayrshire's Isle of Arran is the seventh-largest Scottish island, being around twenty miles long and nine miles wide. It boasts everything that the rest of Scotland has to offer: mountains, lochs, a rich variety of wildlife and birds, glens and plains, a lot of water and plenty of single malt whisky from the Isle of Arran distillery, which is what I am here for.





The Vikings colonized the island up to the 13th century, and Robert the Bruce is said to have sheltered here with his pet spider at the start of the 14th. From the beginning of the 16th century Arran was, by royal charter, under the control of Sir James Hamilton, and it was he who built the imposing castle stronghold still standing here at Brodick.

Normally I would take the time to go round the castle, but today I make my way along the A841 to another tourist sight, the not (yet) very historic whisky distillery on the north side of the island. It might be difficult to believe, but two hundred years ago there were around fifty distilleries on Arran, mostly illegal smugglers' bothies. Taking the 'Arran waters' was a popular pastime in Glasgow and the whisky from here was said to be on a par with that of Islay or Speyside. The last distillery on Arran closed in the 1830s, perhaps due to difficulties in the transport of raw materials and finished product compared to elsewhere.



The road takes me up along the western shore of the island, with mainland Britain disappearing into the drizzly mist to my right, and thick woods swaying in the breeze to the left of the road for much of the way. Huge seals resting on glacial erratics in the water eye me with lazy and imperious expressions, taking in the optimistic biker on holiday as if they have seen it all before.

After the hamlet of Corrie the road veers off inland to the east and crosses the island heading for Lochranza. Treeless hills appear and I get over them at what can only be described as a moderate pace. My Vespino always seems to get me there in the end, even today when the rain

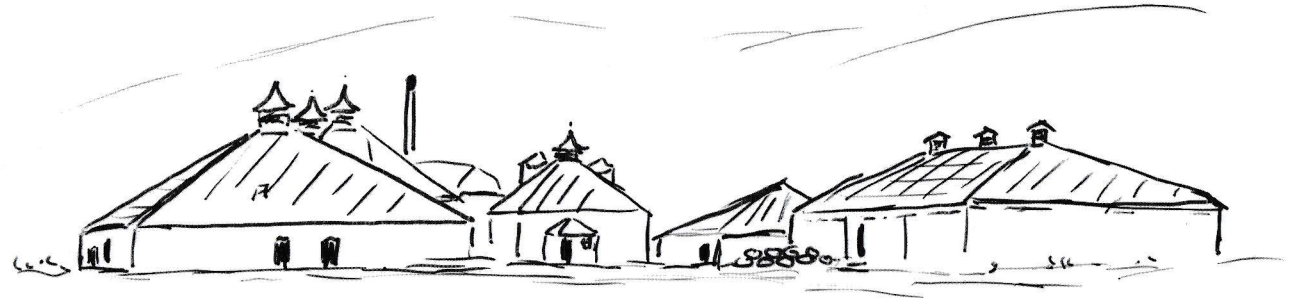
gradually gathers strength with the apparent purpose of introducing me to the weather in these parts. I was wondering would it rain much on my trip, and am now left in no doubt whatsoever on that score.

The 874-metre peak of Goat Fell dominates the last few miles of the road to Lochranza. Then quite suddenly, as I pass the large grassy mass of Eagle Crag, a cluster of black and white buildings comes into view with a sign announcing the welcome presence of a whisky distillery, the first to be built on Arran for over 150 years.

## ISLE OF ARRAN

*Dear Ben,  
Thanks for your e-mail. We will be producing all summer.  
If you would let us know when you plan to visit we can  
confirm  
this for you.  
Kind Regards,  
Jaclyn  
Sales Manager  
Isle of Arran Distillers Ltd*

This has hardly been what you would call a baptism of fire, quite the opposite, in fact, and by this time I am conscious of being literally dripping wet. Parking up, I am naturally apprehensive about visiting my first Scotch distillery of the trip, especially as I realise it is much later than I thought. The ferry was delayed and it took twice as long as I had calculated to ride the fourteen miles from Brodick to Lochranza. Over hilly roads it would seem that twenty miles per hour is the Vespa's average speed. To tell you the truth, I have never really known how fast it can go because there is no speedometer. When Vespinos came out they didn't have speedometers, just a black cover where you could, if you wanted, have one fitted as an 'accessory'. Since it has never had one, I'm not getting one. Even rear-view mirrors were accessories back then, but nowadays at least one is required by law.



I wrote to all the distilleries on my route, to check if they would be open and willing to give me a tour, but I have missed my first appointment of the trip. Late, but fortunately not too late to get in, I walk into the foyer and start dripping water on the floor by the counter. The visitors' centre is decorated like a sort of old smugglers' inn with a huge indoor waterfall, exhibition area and distillery shop. As feared, due to my lack of punctuality, the last tour has already gone and Jaclyn is nowhere to be found.

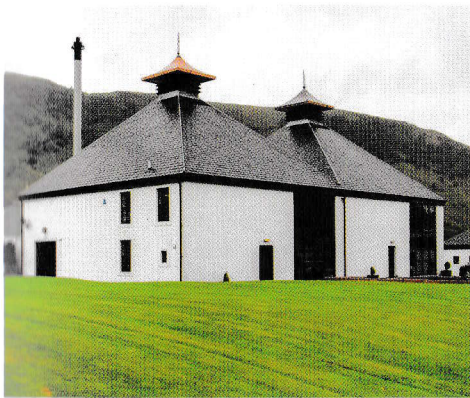
Expecting to be turned away, I get talking to one of the guides who is still hanging around the foyer, Andy. He is interested in my trip and tells me that I won't find many distilleries like this on my travels. Isle of Arran is one of only about half a dozen independent distilleries in Scotland, he tells me.

I am pleasantly surprised by Andy's openness to chat, and by his willingness to tell me what he has probably been telling people all day. He doesn't even seem to mind that I am making a puddle on his floor. Founded in 1995 by Harold Currie, ex-CEO of Chivas, Isle of Arran is still a claimant to the title of 'newest distillery in Scotland'. I sense that they are cautious of using that too much in their marketing because:



1, it is no great claim to fame in an industry preoccupied with age and tradition, and 2, such a claim can get outdated at any time, and if you count one or two new small-scale distilleries it already is out of date.

To plan a new distillery must be a distillery manager's dream. Everything is laid out in a logical order, there are no historical idiosyncrasies or problems with space, the rooms are laid out with regard to easy access for both distillers and public, and large windows look out picturesquely over the bay. Even the shapes of the stills were chosen to get exactly that type of spirit they were looking for, which, according to Andy, is a light and floral, unpeated, more towards the Speyside than Islands style of single malt.



The area of Ayrshire and Arran sits in the Lowlands, but Isle of Arran belongs to the Islands whisky region, which neatly avoids the discussion as to whether it is a Highland or a Lowland whisky. I have to say that it came as quite a surprise to me to learn that 'Highland' and 'Lowland' in whisky geography has little to do with school geography. The Highland Boundary Fault geographically separates the two lands and draws a long curving line from here at Lochranza up the Firth of Clyde, through Loch Lomond to Crieff, eventually reaching the sea just north of Stonehaven.

Highland is also a council area for the top of Scotland starting somewhere around Dalwhinnie, but the accepted border between Highland and Lowland distilleries follows a straight line drawn between the two ends of the fault from Greenock to Dundee. It is some miles south of the real boundary and originates from a division made in the 18th century for

tax purposes. This means that some distilleries in the Lowlands make what are termed Highland single malts, which is a bit confusing, but the fact that they don't complain about it is perhaps testament to the fame and reputation of Highland whisky over the ages.

Incidentally, the Lowlands may even be the first place where whisky was ever distilled - legally - in Britain, as it was at Lindores Abbey on the south bank of the Firth of Tay where a certain Friar John Cor was granted the earliest recorded licence to distil by Henry VII. The Exchequer Roll of 1495 reads:

***To Friar John Cor, by order of the King,  
to make Aquavitae 8 bols of malt.***

Eight bols! Now, I don't know how much a bol is exactly, but that sounds like a lot of malt.

Though this is the first distillery I visit on my trip, I sense that at Isle of Arran they are close to finding just that right mix of tradition and modern technology that they were looking for. They seem to have come with a fresh outlook on the industry, while drawing on the experience of those who have already worked in it for years, like James MacTaggart, the master blender, who Andy says was 'nose' hunted from Bowmore. The whole plant took about two years to build. Construction was halted for some weeks to allow the eagles on the eponymous crag up there to hatch their chicks, and perhaps as a gesture of thanks the eagles performed an impromptu fly-past during the opening ceremony in 1995.



A single malt Scotch distillery built from scratch can hardly hope to start making much of a profit for at least ten years, and that is if they got it right in the first

place. It must be a bit of an investment nightmare, or at least a leap of faith, and this might explain why not many new distilleries do crop up.

Arran is the only distillery in Scotland with permission to use the image of the Scottish national poet, Robbie Burns, on the labels. I think he would have approved, since it is well known that the Ayrshire poet was a great admirer of his native drink, as he wrote in *Tam O'Shanter*:

*Inspiring bold John Barleycorn!  
What dangers thou canst make us scorn!  
Wi' tippeny, we fear nae evil;  
Wi' usquabae, we'll face the devil!*

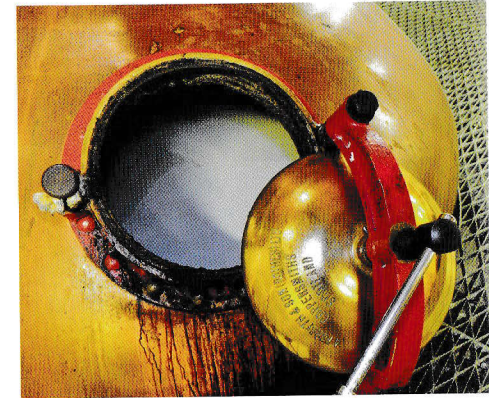
Isle of Arran uses Menstrie yeast and a high-yield strain of barley called Optic, which comes ready malted without peating from Baird's in Montrose. Lochranza was apparently chosen for the soft pure water from Loch na Davie, or 'Loch of the Deer', which reaches the distillery by way of the Easan Biorach River and takes character from the tough granite and soft peat it runs through along the way.

There are four workers on the production side, outnumbered by a seasonally variable group of tour guides. The distillery produces around 350,000 litres of fresh whisky, or 'new make spirit', a year, which would, at a rough guess, translate as about that many bottles of single malt whisky by the time it is matured.

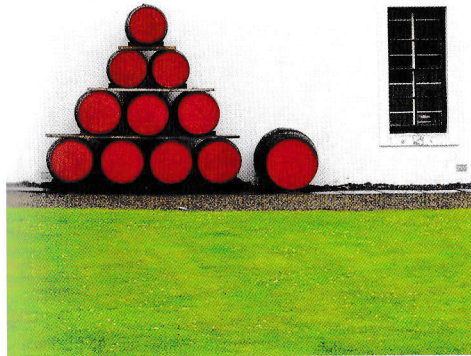
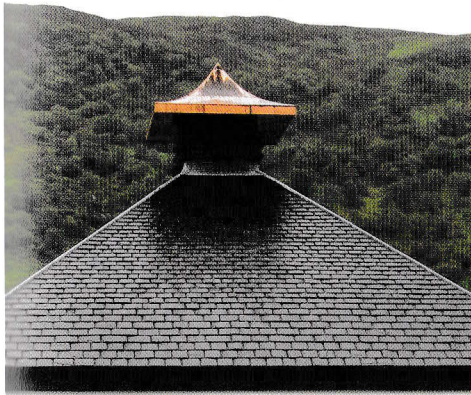
As the rain shows signs of stopping, Andy suggests I go across the yard to peep in at the stillhouse where two slender, swan-necked stills wait for action. They were modelled on the stills at Macallan in Speyside, which boldly states their flavour target. The wash still takes a mash of 6,500 litres and the spirit still is quite a bit smaller, and that makes sense because there is less stuff to distil the second time around.

But this is not just the stillhouse. Most stages of production are in the same room: the grist hopper to hold the ground malt, the mash tun where the sugars are dissolved from the grist, the Douglas fir washbacks where the fermenting is done, and the copper stills that turn the alcohol into steam, each with its own copper condenser to turn the steam back again into liquid.

A good proportion of the spirit is matured here on site. Andy shows me into what he calls a 'modern take' on the traditional warehouse. 'Dunnage' is the age-old system, favoured by purists, where casks are tightly stacked three high, separated only by wooden staves. Here at Isle of Arran, casks are individually and closely racked three high above earthen floors, in the traditional manner, but with a mechanism whereby each cask is accessible independently of the others.



Photos: Isle of Arran distillery



With its traditional wooden washbacks and dunnage-type warehouses, Isle of Arran is a thoroughly modern distillery set up in a traditional, handcrafted and non-automated manner. I have seen photographs of some modern distilleries that look like petrol refineries, particularly the huge grain whisky plants, and this, decidedly, is not one of them.

The grounds are spotless. Made-to-measure buildings sit evenly placed around the site, surrounded by perfectly kept lawns with whisky barrel flower vases and picnic benches, while copper 'pagodas' sit above the roofs of each building. Pagoda roofs were chimney ventilators designed to both draw air up and keep smoke down in the malt kilns. At Arran there are no maltings and the pagodas are just for show, aesthetic references to the function of the site that mark this out as a distillery as much as any signboard can for those coming unsuspectingly round Eagle Crag.

I confess to having been a little concerned that Isle of Arran might turn out to be something like a heritage centre mock-up of a distillery for the 68,000 visitors they get a year, but it seems not. It hasn't yet got that aura of time-honoured maturity that we might look for in a distillery, the place is just a little bit too shiny and well presented for that. Similarly the whisky, though prize winning, is said to be still on the juvenile side of the ageing process. But these things will no doubt all change with the test of time, a test that Isle of Arran will surely pass with flying colours.

The range of Arran malts is growing year by year and they offer 10 to 18 year olds, with cask strength releases and their Robbie Burns expression. They have miniature bottles in the shop, so I take the standard Arran 10 away with me to taste tonight. I thank Andy for his impromptu unpaid overtime, and wish this newest of full-scale single malt distilleries all the best in a market that, let's face it, can hardly be easy to break into.

The village of Lochranza, about a minute down the road from the distillery, is home to 250 of Arran's 5,000 inhabitants. Robert the Bruce landed here on his journey from Ireland to stake his claim for the Scottish throne, and no doubt spent some time at the castle sampling the local produce, as did James IV and Oliver Cromwell at later dates.

Positioned on the north shore of the island, facing north and dominated by that large crag, on an island renowned for its abundant annual rainfall, the village of Lochranza unsurprisingly has one of the lowest sunshine hour counts in the British Isles. Ruined Lochranza Castle sits as an evocative shell on a promontory before the village. I start to sketch a view of the castle, but the rain comes again and changes my mind as the pencil slithers across and digs into the wet paper. That may be just as well, because the ferry to Kintyre is about to leave and without much time to spare I ride down to the pier.





There are a couple of other passengers in the tiny seating area to one side of the deck. The Vespa stands alone with no other vehicles on board and I understand now why there wasn't a pre-booking facility online.

My two fellow passengers are on a walking tour, what they call 'fly' camping, which perhaps has something to do with the midges. They are intending to walk across the Kintyre peninsula to arrive on Islay by ferry tomorrow. I suppose the advantage of walking and camping is that you can always go off the road and find a quiet nook to put up a tent. Planning a route to coincide with campsites is not a difficult thing in Scotland, however, since there are so many of them. I think it must be surprising to those coming from sunnier countries that camping is such a popular pastime in this climate.

Kintyre is a 30-mile long peninsula in Argyll and Bute that stretches from Tarbert in the north to the Mull of Kintyre in the south, and is no more than eleven miles at its widest. It has standing stones, Iron Age forts, a few castles, 40% less rainfall than the rest of Scotland and makes do with just one traffic warden. There are two towns, Campbeltown in the south and Tarbert at the northern extremity of the peninsula. At that point, only a mile-long stretch of land between West Loch Tarbert and East Loch Tarbert prevents Kintyre from being an island. Campbeltown is the larger settlement and is home to the region's two remaining distilleries: Glen Scotia and Springbank, both of which I am to visit tomorrow.

I wave goodbye to my fellow passengers as they set off on foot. They head for the road that leads up and across the hills, while I ride south along the single-track B842 coast road through the hamlets of Crossaig, Cour and the oddly but perhaps aptly named Grogport. Kintyre is a location every bit as important in the history of distilleries as Islay or Speyside. Were it not for those two noble survivors, however, it might well have been forgotten by now as a whisky-producing area.

The celebrated Scotch tourist Alfred Barnard, who with his seminal work *The Whisky Distilleries of the United Kingdom* of 1887 single-handedly invented the whisky trail, called Campbeltown the 'whisky city'. Barnard records some thirty distilleries in the vicinity. The whole place must have reeked of mash. Great. In its heyday it had the highest income per capita of any town in the British Isles but, after around a hundred years of undiluted success, someone pulled the plug and the number of working distilleries fell to a handful, and eventually two. So what went wrong? I don't know but intend to find out.

It soon becomes obvious that I will not make it to Campbeltown this evening to start my investigations. After a ride of about an hour I come to a campsite at Carradale and decide to stop for the night. Though I think it unlikely that all the campsites will be full around here, it is a relief all the same to find that they have space and I can check in. The places are laid out in neat and spacious sections, and during a pause in the rain, the only one of the evening it turns out, I hastily pitch my tent.





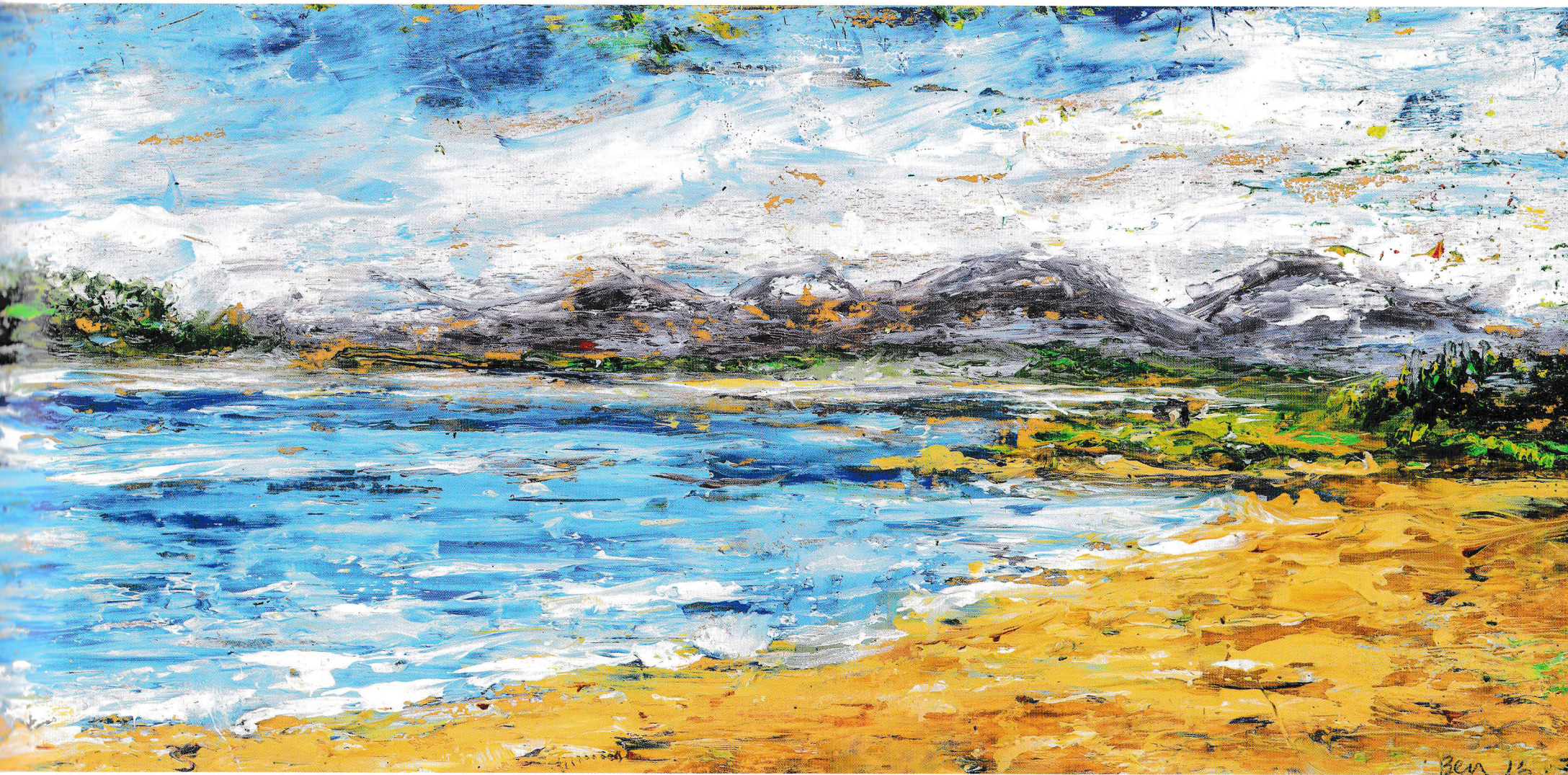
Thanks to the brief dry spell, I look forward to a relatively cosy night, though I have forgotten to buy food and the cooking aromas from neighbouring campers, sheltering inside the verandas of their tents, are just slightly less than tormenting. To compensate, I have a couple of yesterday's rolls and a bit of cheese, plus a welcome miniature of Isle of Arran whisky fresh from the distillery.

Thanks to my invaluable experience in Appenzell, I have taken the 'pledge' to let no drop pass my lips until the day's riding is done. This may not be as easy as it sounds, given that tour guides are, if you get on the right side of them, only too willing to let you try a few of the whiskies in their range, especially if you look like you might buy a couple of crates. I don't think I give that impression. I look like I can't afford a couple of crates, and even if I could, I wouldn't know where to put them.

Drivers on distillery tours should carry a small hip flask, or a few empty miniature bottles to remove the temptation to sample everything that is on offer. I have taken the standard house malt, Isle of Arran 10, from this relative newcomer, a pristine, model distillery that manages to combine the sort of unnaturally clean corners of a planned settlement with a keen eye to good practice and respect for tradition. For the first few years the distillery cautiously released an expression with no age statement, leaving punters guessing as to how many years old it was. Everyone agreed that it got better and better each year, as might be expected, and there is no reason to believe that it will not go on doing so.

This ten year old at 46% proves to be strong and warming, although that wouldn't be difficult on an evening like this. Andy said that after the first few sips many tasters water it down to about 40%, but I'll pass on that, having had my fair share of water for today. There is the slightest hint of smoke or peat, although it is not supposed to have any smoke in it, but I might be imagining that because I have just lit a fire for my kettle. I think it has a sweet, youthful, but mildly metallic or acidic character towards the finish. It is certainly not one of the heavier whiskies on offer and perhaps has not enough fullness yet to impress everyone, but give it time. I have read the imaginative research of other tasters of Isle of Arran who report hints of cantaloupe melon, green apples, hazelnuts, coconut, liquorice, cinnamon, wild flowers, dried grass and cereals. Add to that a certain nuance of Speyside, what Andy calls a 'Macallan smoothness' and you have an interesting malt.

Though Isle of Arran may not have the two centuries of experience and tradition behind it that some distilleries boast, on this damp evening somewhere down the east side of the Kintyre peninsula, looking back over to the island where it was made, it goes down in that definitely time-honoured fashion known as 'a treat'. And if, like some notable whisky writers, I were giving marks out of 100 to each whisky I tasted, I honestly wouldn't know what to give Arran 10. If pushed, I think I would give it nothing short of 100/100 tonight.



Ben 12.03

*Kintyre*