



FLOWER OF SCOTLAND

The Rake pays a visit to Scotland's speyside district, a wheat and barley soaked land boasting some of the oldest distilleries in the world.

by **tom norton**

While Edinburgh's legendary Hogmanay celebrations, Glasgow's pulsating nightlife and St Andrews' historical golf heritage have long since put Scotland on the destination map, there is a factor for which Britain's most northern quarter is suitably more famed: its inarguable status as the home of malt whisky.

The level of business it brings to Scotland's shores is quite staggering. With its value to the UK economy estimated to be around the £5bn [Dhs28bn] mark, it's a bigger commodity than the computer, shipbuilding, textiles and iron and steel industries and accounts for 25 percent of the UK's total food and drink exports.

Hence a quiet corner of the Highlands – Speyside – is actually of vital importance to the country's economy. Easily the biggest region in terms of production, half of Scotland's distilleries are peppered among the region's undulating landscape. Of these, you'll recognise household names such as Chivas Brothers Ltd, Glenlivet and the Strathisla distillery – purchased in 1950 by Chivas Brothers Ltd, to safeguard the brand's special blended malt.

All of these distilleries house tours of varying depth and experience, from free guides around the warehouses, to a comprehensive tastings of the 'goods'. Some drops date back decades and decades, others are so rare they've never been bottled. For the most authentic of introductions, you can

sample a dram (to use the Scottish vernacular) out of one of the aged casks, in the dusty chambers of the distilleries' cellars. At the Strathisla distillery you'll learn about the brand's history and connections with the Chivas Regal and Royal Salute blends, from the comfort of a wood panelled boardroom for a tutored tasting. This will include four expressions of Strathisla, Chivas Regal 25 year old and Royal Salute 21 year old. You'll also be ushered into The Royal Salute Vault to sample the 38 year old Stone of Destiny straight

The Rake would advise taking your time to learn about nosing and other details and find a barrel with your birthdate to try. If you wish to rest your head in the heart of this wheat and barley soaked land, you'll find The Craigellachie Hotel among the local running burns and winding hillside tracks. Erected in 1893, the beautiful, white-walled establishment's standing as the best hotel around was galvanised last year, following a full, and loving refurbishment. The Craigellachie was reportedly a favoured travel haunt of Queen Victoria, and – should you be looking for a more recent claim to fame – was recently taken over by British model Kate Moss and her pals, celebrating Burns Night in her customary fashion at the start of the year.

So, whether you consider yourself a particular scotch aficionado or not, the quaint charms of this beautiful district hold something for all, offering a chance to be among nature, historical surroundings and a vibrant culture, all at the same time.