

A great whisky island needs
a great whisky celebration.
And Alex Mennie likes
to arrive in style.

Every May, whisky lovers descend on Islay for Fèis Ìle – nine days of distillery open days, rare drams, live music and late-night camaraderie.

Beyond the limited releases and early-morning queues, it's the ritual of returning that keeps them coming back.

Every year they come. By yacht, ferry, plane or sometimes, by Dutch-built three-masted barquentine. Over the years, I've ticked off three of those, each a slightly different, but no less



Sailing to FÈIS ÌLE



exciting way to approach Islay for Fèis Ìle, the week-long celebration of the island's whisky and culture.

The ferry from Kennacraig is the most common. Bringing a car? You need to get into the festival spirit early in the year by treating the Caledonian MacBrayne summer ticket launch like the Glastonbury pre-sale. It's hard to imagine, as you make the two-hour crossing, that those around you were also hitting refresh to get their Bruichladdich-blue camper van on for the ninth year running.

In the ferry lounge, the talk is all about whisky. Last time, I met familiar faces from Lagavulin days past and made new friends in faded T-shirts from previous years, mainly thanks to their dogs in bandanas, with whisky-pins on their leads.

Arrival by yacht lacks the festival feel. It's slower, more controlled, but the southwest coastal sail-by of the Kildalton trilogy - Ardbeg, Lagavulin, Laphroaig - is enough to set hearts racing no matter how many times it's been done. Your own yacht might seem impractical and



extravagant — you can't guarantee any warehouse tasting and every commitment comes with "weather permitting". But on an island where accommodation is booked up almost a year in advance, renting travel and a bed in one (relatively) affordable package is a reasonable option. As long as at least one of your friends knows how to sail the thing, of course.

By plane, the anticipation is over quicker – no sooner have you excitedly recognised Arran and Campbeltown from the window than you are over the patchwork of green fields and brown peat bogs. You can lean your head back against the tartan headrest of a Loganair prop plane, half-eaten Tunnock's in hand, as you swoop low over the modern green warehouses of Laphroaig and into the charm of the tiny airport. It has its benefits, but it misses

the moments that will always mean arriving on Islay to me: the wide turn at Carraig Fhada lighthouse to avoid the rocks guarding Kilnaughton Bay; the smell of peat smoke from Port Ellen maltings before you even step ashore; and that's not idle romance.



The harbour genuinely smells of peat smoke, and the first road sign you see as you drive off the ferry (or step off the yacht and head towards the loos) says:

< Bowmore 10

Ardbeg >

It seems like a decision you have to make, but thanks to the festival committee, your week is pretty much mapped out

for you and has more or less followed the same format since the 'Islay Festival of Music and Malt' began in 1986. Each of the island's distilleries takes a day during the 'week' - now nine full days - hosting tours, warehouse tastings, special releases and live music. Saturday is always Lagavulin, Sunday the music festival vibes of Bruichladdich's Rock'ndaal. Then Caol »



Ila, Laphroaig, Port Ellen and so on until Ardbeg on the final Saturday.

The vibes will differ from site to site – some, like Bowmore, will see long queues forming at dawn for their limited release bottles. Tweed-capped Germans and kilted Italians trailing down School Street to The Square, where the auction vans are parked just across from the RBS cash point. Others are more of a walk-in affair. The many stairs down to Caol Ila to enjoy music and oysters with a view over to Jura, or the ‘wander the farm’ feel of Kilchoman, where Danish pilgrims enthuse over floor maltings and cut points.

There are queues at Bruichladdich on

the (always) sunny Sunday as well. Local residents may pop up a gazebo and fry bacon and lorne for your morning roll. Strangers will make friends in the queues, sharing bottle openers and memories, recommendations and maybe a hip flask.

This year, Rock'ndaal will have even more of a celebratory feel, as Bruichladdich celebrates 25 years since its reopening, as well as the 40th anniversary of Fèis Ìle. “Every year we’re in competition with ourselves to go one better than the previous year,” explains Global Marketing Director, Gareth Brown, “And 2026 is no exception. We’ve got more drams, the biggest musical acts and extra



surprises in store for those who make their pilgrimage to the distillery to help us celebrate on the day.”

With this year’s acts including the whisky-soaked sea shanties of Nathan Evans and The Saint PHNX band, as well as a return from Rock'ndaal favourites

Tide Lines, those friends from the queue will be singing together on the buses back to Port Ellen. Decked in matching distillery bobble hats, metal dram cups in hand, with ‘Far Side of the World’ stuck in their head for the next eleven months.

Later in the week – Wednesday – you’ll find a steady stream of hikers heading up the undulating path past the school and its playing fields towards Laphroaig. The schoolkids sell bottles of Irn Bru and tray bakes – empire biscuits and millionaire’s shortbread to last just as long as the walk. For some reason, it always seems to rain on Laphroaig day. But the weather seems to fit. The pours get a little heavier – gratitude for the journey measured in tenths of a gill – and wellies and cagoules for a walk to your own



square foot of Islay fly off the pegs.

On the way back, the same band that was loading in on the walk-up will be playing raucously in the Ardview Arms. And they'll still be there after dinner, behind a table spread with chanter, Irn Bru, and empty glasses. The piper might slump on his arms for a wee break, while the keyboard player discordantly finishes Van Morrison's "Bright Side of the Road" with the base of a pint glass. For some reason, every other song is the theme tune to Animal Hospital. Your quick after-dinner pint is slowly slipping off the rails, but...

Away from the whisky, there's the food. Fresh oysters at every distillery will let you decide which dram works best in place of mignonette. Elsewhere, there are barbecues, regardless of the weather, and food trucks from across the island (including from the excellently named Bowmore Peatzzeria). You should also spend time in the pubs, or at one of the official (or impromptu) ceilidhs. Definitely chat to the locals. Maybe you'll meet the lobster fisherman with a challenging personal relationship. I still can't be sure why he thought I was the best person to unload to at 3pm, on a

cloudy Tuesday, but then I was already at the bar with a hauf n hauf in hand.

A raucous week concludes for many with a raucous Ardbeg Day. There's always a theme (space, superheroes, or space-superheroes) and fancy dress (for the staff and management at least) is mandatory. In many ways, you haven't truly experienced Fèis Ìle until you've danced to Dire Straits covers played from the back of a soft-sided lorry in a rainy car park. Whether or not there's a squid, or



Photos © Fèis Ìle the Islay Festival

a distillery manager in a pith helmet and explorer's costume joining you.

"Ardbeg Day is special for so many reasons," explains Distillery Manager Bryony McNiven, "But I love seeing the community it creates - friendships for life can be forged over a dram of Ardbeg. Seeing everyone come together in the courtyard towards the end of the day to soak up the last of the atmosphere is amazing".

It would be trite, at this point, to say you'll return for the people. You'll return for the island, its people and the people it attracts. So if you're considering it - well, book well ahead. The island fills up fast. You don't have to hit every distillery day - it can be too much, and balance is important. Pick two or three you care about, and leave room for exploring other

parts of Islay spontaneously.

And what about those limited-release bottles everyone queues for at dawn? Some might be worth it, but many just appear on auction sites for triple the price before the week's out. The best drams I've had at Fèis Ìle weren't the hyped special releases - they were warehouse samples poured generously by distillery workers excited to share the wealth, or a casual cask strength pour in a pub after midnight, shared with strangers who'd become friends.

The whisky matters, obviously. But Fèis Ìle works because of the island, its people, and the ritual of returning. Every year they come. By yacht, ferry, plane, or sometimes by Dutch-built three-masted barquentine. And every year, most of them decide to come back again.