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## SCOTTISH STYLE

*The enchanting Isle of Islay has more sheep than people, eight whisky distilleries and a stylishly restored historic hotel with sea views and a challenging links golf course*

Written by Carolyn O'Neil

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Called the Queen of the Hebrides, Islay is an island off the west coast of Scotland known for world-class whisky (yes, it's spelled without the "e" in Scotland), woolen mills and a wildly beautiful coastal landscape. Most travelers to Scotland first choose to visit the historic sites of Edinburgh, the golfing mecca of St. Andrews or try their luck spotting "Nessie" on Loch Ness. But for those ready to explore the charms of rural Scottish life, the Isle of Islay is a perfect retreat.

Pretty bluebells fill the forests in spring and purple heather covers the hills in late summer. The climate is relatively mild due to the warming effects of the Gulf Stream, and visitors will often see seals and otters

playing in the surf along the windswept beaches. Winding roads lead past quaint country cottages, grassy fields filled with grazing sheep and tidy towns with whitewashed buildings. Celtic crosses and stone ruins are a reminder of ancient clan history to be discovered. Want to know more? A “wee dram” or two of the island’s coveted single malt Scotch will help you get to know the friendly locals in no time.

In fact, Islay is best known for the peaty, smoky taste of its single malt whiskies, and the deliciously educational distillery tours along the “whisky trail” are a big draw for visitors. Top-shelf Islay whiskies include Laphroaig, Bowmore and Bruichladdich, and is also home to The Botanist gin, created from 22 foraged island botanicals.

Fashion fans should stop at the Islay Woollen Mill, established in 1883, to admire the fine art of weaving tweeds. Originally used for cozy country jackets, caps and waistcoats, today tweed throws and scarves are popular. Fabrics designed here have graced British royals and Hollywood stars including the costumes worn in the film *Braveheart*.

After a day of sipping and sightseeing your way around the island, unwind at The Machrie Hotel & Golf Links where traditional Scottish style—including Islay tweed on the sofa and a metal stag’s head over the mantel—is not forgotten, but the decor is decidedly fresh and modern. This newly renovated and expanded historic hotel with 47 rooms and suites greets guests with a stately Victorian-era entrance and then wows them with a modern expanse of windows overlooking the links and dunes beyond. Nestled along a 7-mile-long beach, The Machrie is the design creation of native Scotsman and world-renowned hotelier Gordon Campbell Gray.

Visit the hotel’s spacious Stag Lounge where guests can enjoy an elegant afternoon tea with sandwiches and scones or come later for cocktails and nightcaps served fireside. Locals often gather to dine and celebrate, as the hotel is very much a part of the community. For a more intimate experience, the stunning 18 Restaurant & Bar with vaulted ceilings and golf course views provides a sunny spot for breakfast and a romantic setting for dinners. Locally provisioned seafood stars on the menu including Islay harvested oysters, hard-shelled brown crabs, sea scallops and, of course, Scottish salmon. The artful dishes feature island-grown produce and herbs. Don’t miss the smoked haddock with eggs for breakfast. Haggis optional.

The Machrie’s 18-hole golf course—originally designed in 1891—has been modernized. Today, golfers enjoy the best of traditional links golf, a putting course and state-of-the-art electronics to analyze their game with the expert guidance of golf pro David Foley. If the wind kicks up on the back nine, don’t worry: someone will be out to deliver a warming shot of whisky served on a silver tray to help keep you motivated.

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