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June 2018

Motorhome

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TASTE OF SCOTLAND

Discover whisky galore on a stunning Speyside tour!



Benimar Tessoro 494 at Ballinhalloch, Speyside

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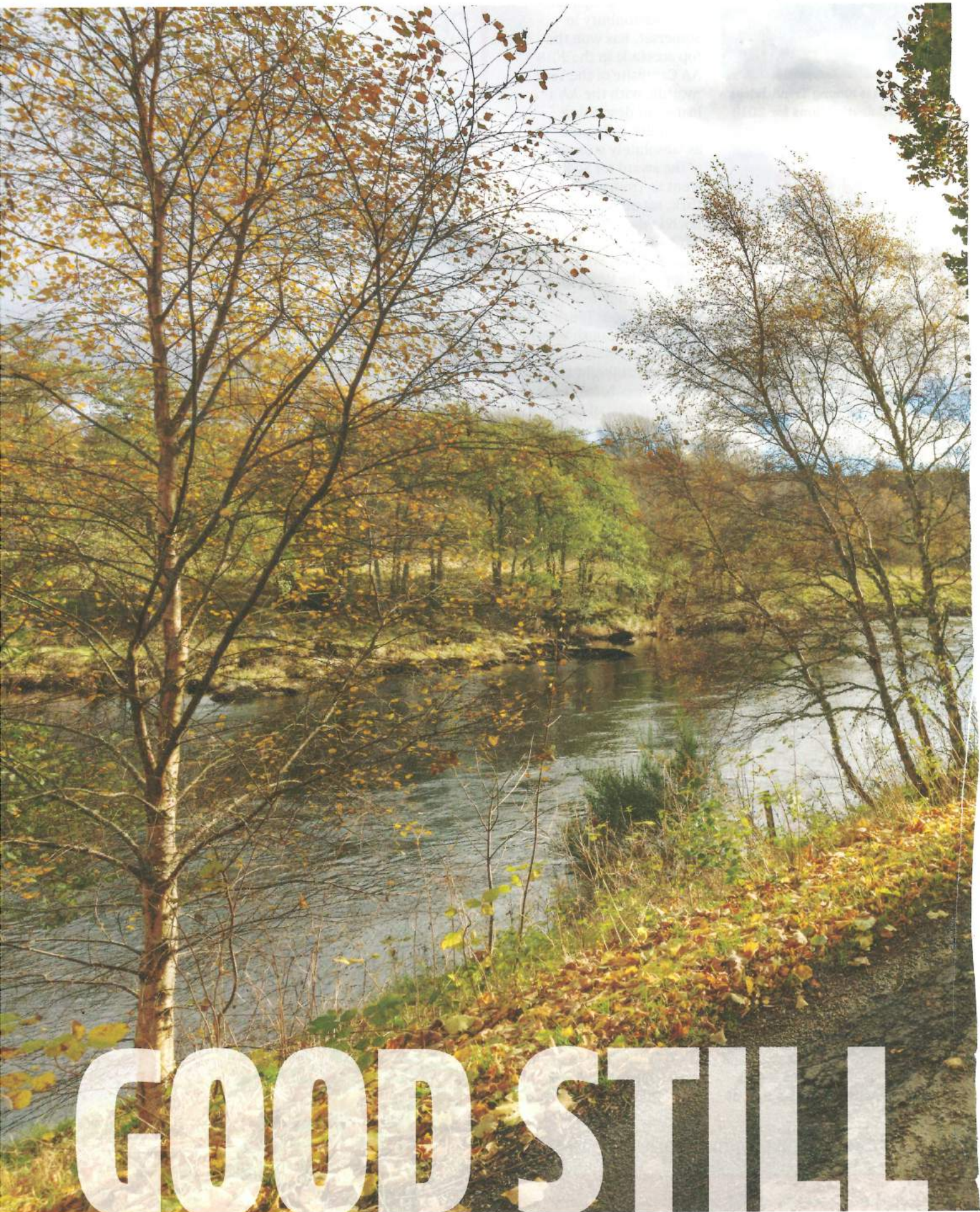
GRAND TOUR
Speyside, Highlands



BENIMAR
Tessoro 494



DURATION
5 days

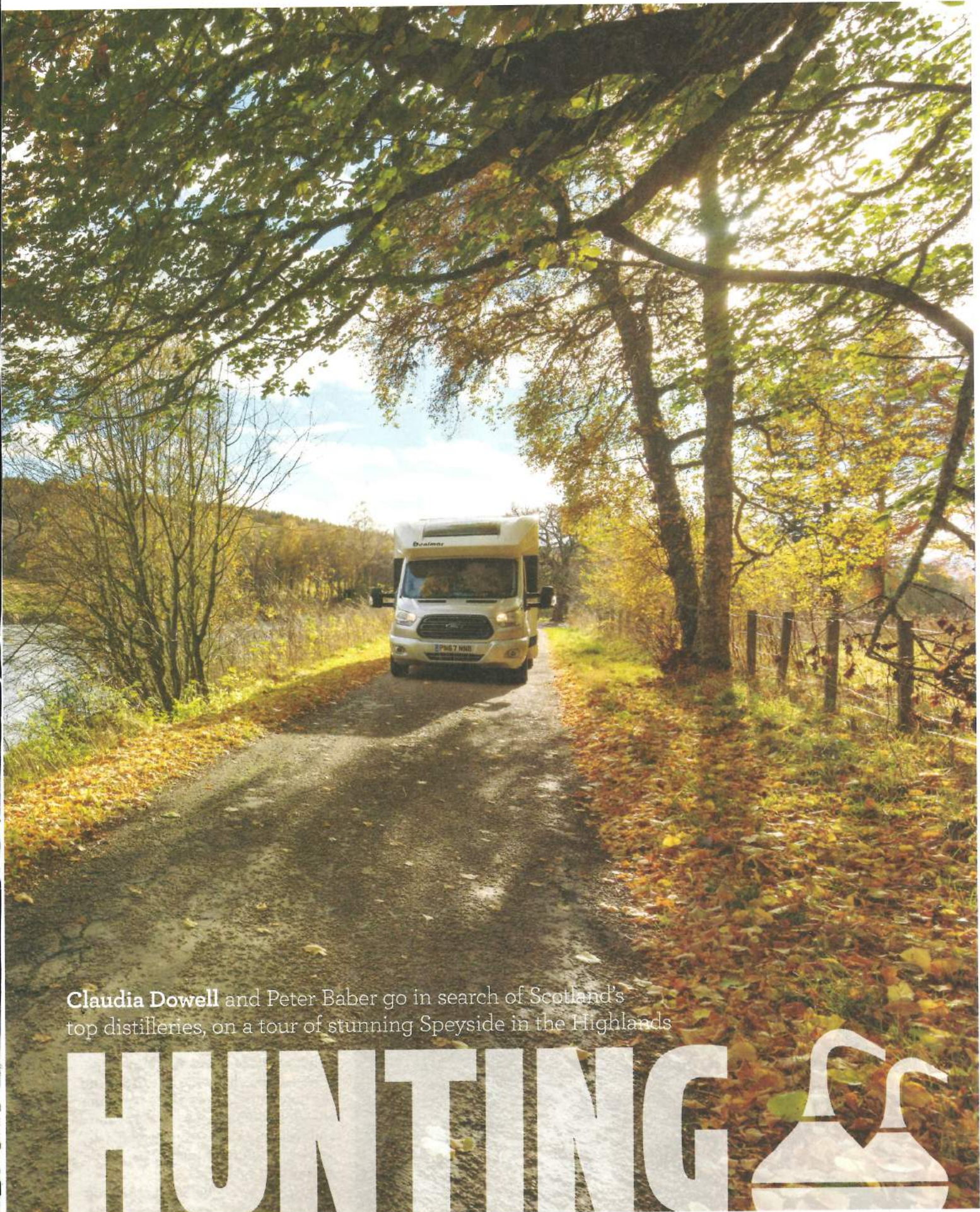




WHEN
Autumn 2017



Dramatic landscapes, Highland history and great whiskies make for a memorable tour



Claudia Dowell and Peter Baber go in search of Scotland's top distilleries, on a tour of stunning Speyside in the Highlands

HUNTING



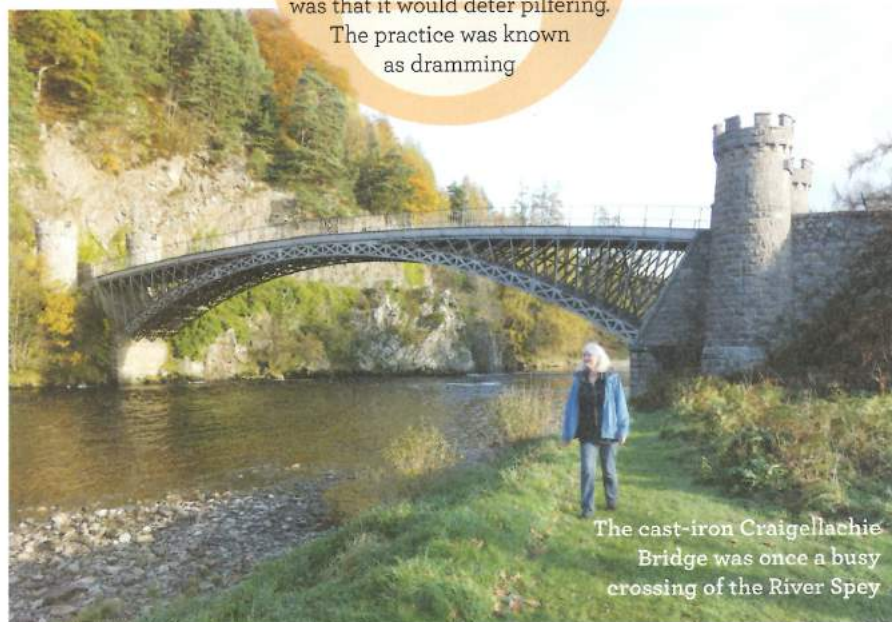
It was an exciting proposition: a solo drive of more than 500 miles from Marquis Motorhomes in Northamptonshire to Speyside in the Highlands of Scotland, and the rewards of exploring malt whisky country would certainly be great. I decided to make an overnight stop and reckoned on Penrith, at about the halfway point.

My wagon for the week, a Benimar Tessoro 494, was due to join the *Practical Motorhome* fleet for a couple of months, and Marquis's Joe Lawrence helpfully spent the best part of an hour bringing me up to speed on the workings of the cab and the habitation area.

I soon settled into the drive, taking the M6 toll road (£11 for a motorhome on a weekday) up past Birmingham. This was autumn (shorter days, longer nights), so after a break en route, I'd left it too late to enjoy the spectacular scenery I was no doubt passing, as the M6 carved its way through the Lake District National Park on one side and the Yorkshire Dales on the other.

I arrived at Lowther Holiday Park, at Eamont Bridge, just after 7pm; I plugged in the electrics, poured myself a glass of wine and made dinner as the 'van speedily warmed up. A quick phone call with colleague Peter Baber confirmed that he was safely tucked up in a separate vehicle somewhere near Carlisle; we were to meet at Speyside Gardens campsite, in Craigellachie, the following day. With the first half of the

DID YOU KNOW THAT...
Up to the mid-1970s, distillery workers were given drams of whisky by the management during their shift; the theory was that it would deter pilfering. The practice was known as dramming



The cast-iron Craigellachie Bridge was once a busy crossing of the River Spey



journey under my belt, I was looking forward to the rest of the drive.

I had no intention of rushing, but it wasn't long before I passed Gretna Green, the M6 became the A74 and I was across the border into Scotland. Speyside was a new destination for me, and I was enjoying every bit of the journey. The smile on my face got

broadener as I progressed along the A9 and through the Cairngorms National Park – I was passing through the most gorgeous scenery and ruing the measly five days that I had

allocated to the trip. It just wasn't going to be long enough, I decided.

My base for the trip

Speyside Gardens Caravan and Camping Park is set in a five-acre Victorian walled garden, and is home to some of the wonderful pine trees I'd seen elsewhere on my journey. Its location, between Aberlour and Craigellachie, also puts it at the heart of malt whisky country.

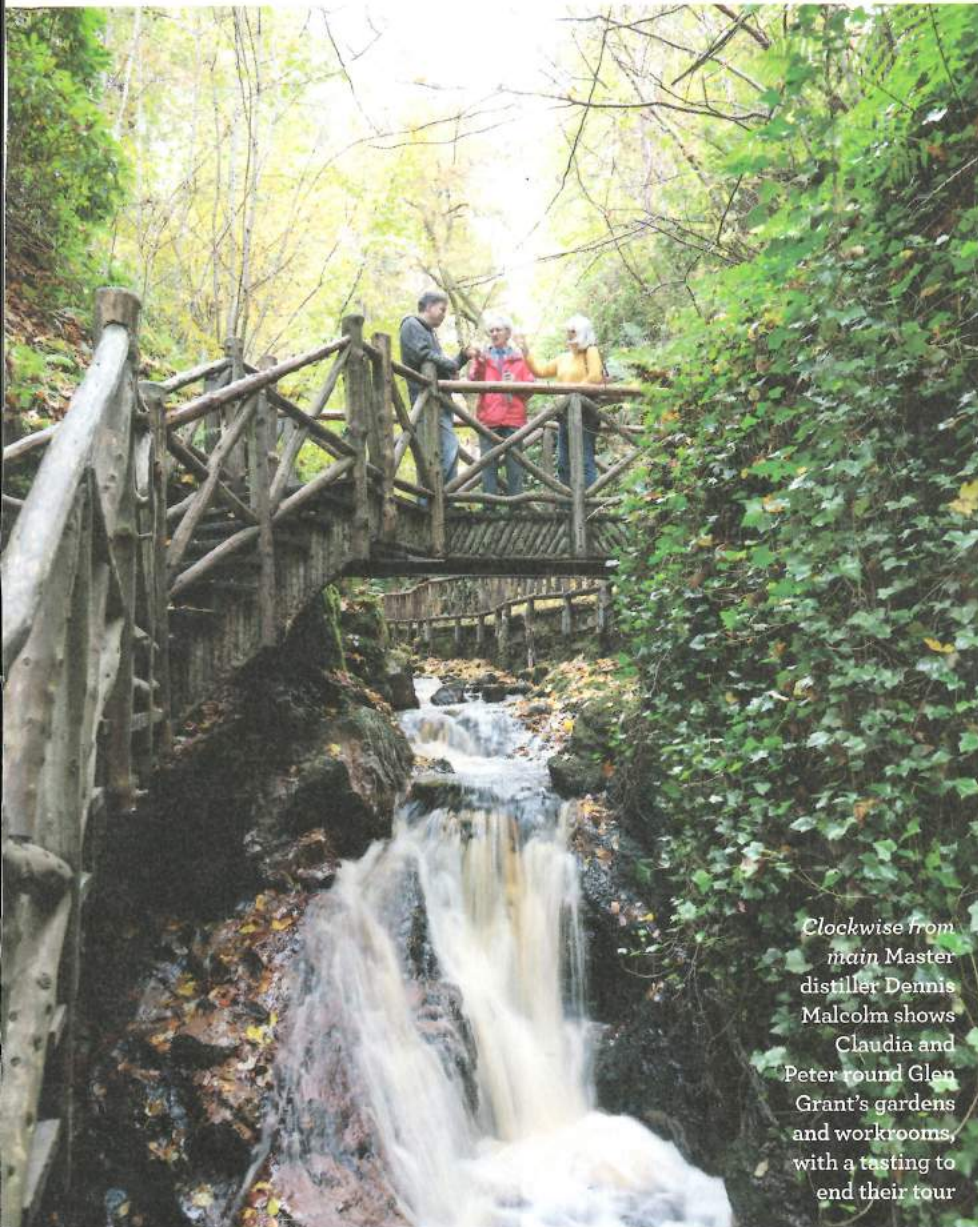
Peter was already set up and had been out visiting Knockando Mill by the time I arrived, so once I had established which was my pitch from owner Oliver (and where he could recommend for dinner), Peter climbed into the cab and we went in search of the Craigellachie Hotel.

The hotel is 1.5 miles from the campsite and, as Peter pointed out, within walking distance; but it was dark and I was tired.

We drove and saw the beautifully lit Craigellachie Bridge en route. Parking in the hotel car park is a bit tight for a 7.5m-long motorhome, but there are a couple of laybys, and a spot by the river where we could just about turn; a sign warns of no overnight parking.

We had no clue what to expect, but the hotel turned out to be a real gem. The ground floor is a welcoming pub and restaurant, The Copper Dog, serving 123 different whiskies, as well as local beers.

The food was delicious. I opted for Royans of Elgin Copper Dog sausage,



*Clockwise from
main Master
distiller Dennis
Malcolm shows
Claudia and
Peter round Glen
Grant's gardens
and workrooms,
with a tasting to
end their tour*



with rumbledethumps, which I guessed would be mash (thank goodness it was) and onion gravy; Peter went for the mussels. Sitting in the cosy pub with a log fire going, we little realised we were close to whisky heaven – one of the world's finest whisky bars was located just above us.

The Quaich Bar – a room of polished wood, copper, velvet and leather – lists 900 single malt whiskies from around the world. We had a peek before returning to camp, and learned that frequent visitors from overseas buy a bottle of whisky and keep it behind the bar, labelled, for their visits.

It looked like a very exclusive club and we decided that a return trip, when we weren't driving, was a must.

With so many distilleries in close proximity, it's little surprise that some have collaborated to set up a trail that

welcomes visitors. I prearranged two stops on the trail, and took a chance that we would have time to do others.

The business of distilling

Our first stop was Glen Grant in the village of Rothes, where we were lucky enough to be shown around by master distiller Dennis Malcolm, who has been with the firm for more than 50 of its 177 years. Rather than heading straight for the business end of making malt whisky, Dennis took us to the garden, of which he was rather proud, having played a big part in its renovation.

The distillery's founder, James Grant, established the garden in the 1840s. Today it is full of delights, including an old shed holding the now defunct pumping equipment to carry water to the distillery, a lily pond, a wooden gazebo with a roof made from heather,

a trail for children, but most of all the gushing waterfall that tumbles through the gorge that is part of the garden.

A fenced walk takes you up through the gorge, with bridges linking the two sides. Dennis stopped at one point along the way and revealed a safe set into the rock. Inside the safe was a bottle of whisky and some glasses.

He poured each of us a dram and then from the bridge, dropped a copper pipe, sealed at one end and tied to a rope, into the waterfall to collect water for our whisky. We felt honoured – we were being treated to a limited-edition malt called Five Decades, blended by Dennis from the finest single malt vintages laid down during his 50 years at the distillery. What I shame I could only take a tiny sip! During the walk, he told us of his rise from apprentice cooper to master distiller, speaking with passion ☺

and affection for the business. It was a job to keep up with him as he tore off past the gunnera (giant rhubarb) and apple trees for the second part of our tour, the distillery itself.

The process and the rooms we passed through are too detailed to recount here, but put very simply, beer is made by soaking malted grain in heated spring water. This releases sugar, then yeast is added to ferment the sugar, and the resulting alcohol is distilled more than once in the beautiful copper stills. These are not just pretty vessels, however: the copper is an important part of the flavour development.

It reduces volatile sulphur compounds during distillation, and the more copper used in the still's various elements, the fruitier the alcohol. The final process is aging for at least three years in barrels from Jerez in Spain, or the US, to take on colour and flavour. We would learn more about this at Speyside Cooperage.

We ended our tour in the modern tasting room in the visitor centre, but sadly I could only have a sniff, because I was driving.

Enjoying the local colour

Gazing out of the Benimar's window next day, drinking my morning cuppa, I spotted a red squirrel. What a treat! The little fella was busy digging up a tasty nut or two, and seemed quite unconcerned when I clattered out of the door to take a photo. He failed to oblige by posing for long, but he was wonderful to watch and looked rather smaller than his grey cousins.

We were going to spend the morning having a tootle about the wonderful countryside, heading out on the A95 towards Ballindalloch. En route, we came across the Glenfarclas Distillery, with its large copper still outside the visitor centre.

Glenfarclas was one of the first to open a visitor centre, back in the 1970s, and it runs tours all year. These range from the £7.50 'Classic' distillery tour, with a taste of whisky at the end and a chance to browse in the shop, to the more in-depth £100 tour, with a chance to try five whiskies from its Family Cask Collection. Peter and

I felt that we now knew quite a bit about whisky making, and settled for a look around the shop.

Whisky miniatures make great gifts if you are going to someone's house for dinner, and gathering one or two here and there would also give me the chance to try the different styles at home and not worry about driving. The distilleries, of course, have thought of this: you can buy empty miniature bottles to fill when you take a tour and have a tasting at the end, so you can try them when you aren't on driving duties. Clever!

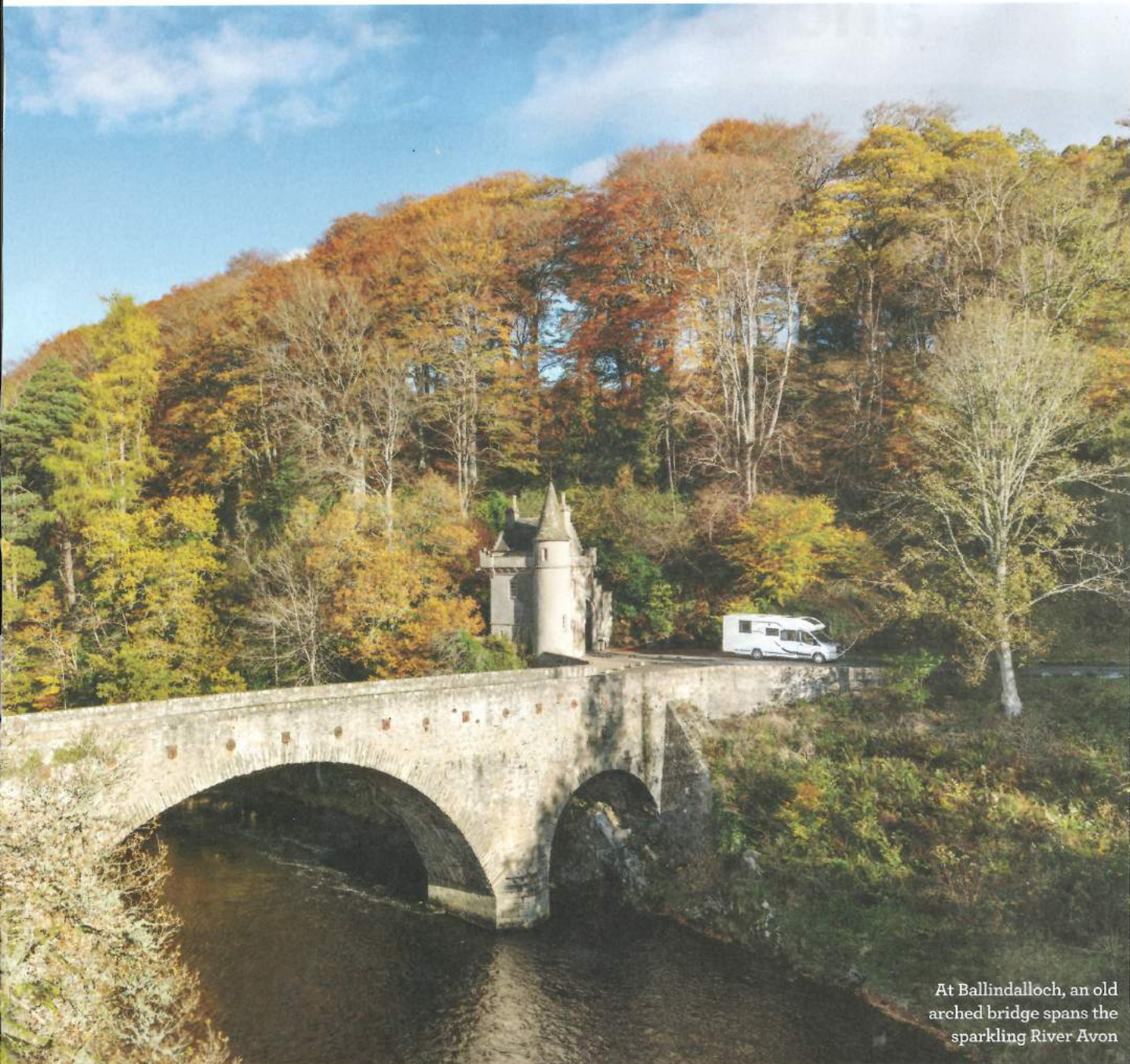
I also found myself buying whisky-flavoured fudge and marmalade – it's so hard to rein oneself in.

A little further on was Ballindalloch Castle and Gardens, which was closed (although we wouldn't have had time to visit, sadly), and just before the Bridge of Avon was a small road to the right that led to what must have been the castle's gatehouse. Here, an old arched bridge crosses the River Avon; ☺

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

In the list of the world's 30 top-selling whiskies, 12 are from India, 10 from Scotland, three from America, two are Canadian, two are Japanese and one is from Ireland





At Ballindalloch, an old
arched bridge spans the
sparkling River Avon

Book ahead if you want to take a tour of the Ballindalloch distillery



it's a beautiful spot for a photograph. What you really notice about the water here is how crystal clear it is.

On the main road is the Ballindalloch Distillery, where you'll find a huge car park. Tours here are by appointment only and range from £35 for a 2.5-hour tour and tasting, to a hands-on day for two learning the art of whisky making for £175. The team here is too small to deal with drop-in visitors, and it didn't seem to have a shop, so we moved on.

At Cromdale we turned right in the village and drove down to the church. We crossed the steel bridge and parked up for a moment to watch the salmon leaping - it was that time of year.

Next we drove to Grantown-on-Spey. I would have liked to stop for a mooch around the shops, but we were both hungry and were heading for a picnic

spot by the River Spey that we had identified, just down from Spey Bridge.

The sky was turning grey and it had started to rain, but the sun fought through and we ate lunch in a golden valley, watching salmon leap up a river flowing through the arc of a rainbow. Perfect!

Barrel building

We had made an appointment for the afternoon to see the Speyside Cooperage, but decided to pop by the 'big daddy' of the malt whisky world: The Macallan distillery. The whisky giant's new £100m-plus premises were across the river from our campsite; although the new distillery

and visitor centre are not due to open to the public until summer 2018, we thought we'd take a peek.

It's extraordinary, with none of those attractive turrets sported by some distilleries. This one is subterranean, and the blips that mark its presence reminded me of the Hobbit dwellings in *The Lord of the Rings* films. Vast warehouses storing wood for bespoke casks and looking more like aircraft hangars were a reminder that this really is big business. It'll be a while before distillations from the new site are ready for bottling, and maintaining continuity of style and flavour has apparently been a major factor in the build.

Stopping here made us late for our appointment at the cooperage, and we only just squeaked in on time. There's a good-sized car park, however, so we had no worries on that score.

We began our tour with a film of the coopers at work. It explained that oak is the only wood used for making barrels, because it allows the contents to 'breathe' without allowing seepage; although there is always a tiny amount, known as the 'angel's share'.

New oak comes from the US, and the barrels for repair and resizing are sherry barrels from Jerez, or bourbon barrels from Kentucky in the US. There's a viewing gallery above the workshop, where you can watch the coopers and apprentices at work.

With special permission to walk the shop floor, we needed to don health

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

The expression 'blind drunk' comes from when early distillers boiled beer to make whisky, not realising that methanol was part of the spirit produced, and that drinking it turned people blind



At Cromdale you can cross the steel bridge and, in season, watch the leaping salmon



DID YOU KNOW THAT...

The use of bourbon barrels for Scotch whisky came about when a federal law was introduced, when prohibition was lifted, banning the reuse of bourbon barrels to protect the US cooper industry

Visit Speyside Cooperage to watch the expert barrel-makers at work

and safety gear – gloves, goggles and hi-vis jackets; we looked even more attractive than usual.

Making barrels is piecework, so the coopers work fast and apparently are paid well. The bourbon and sherry barrels are huge and have to be resized or repaired. No nails or glue are used: it's all down to shaping the oak planks and hammering the metal rings into place to hold them tightly together, with some toasting of the inside of the barrel and steaming to soften the wood. It is fascinating, skilled work – an apprenticeship takes four years.

Our last evening in Speyside found us back at the Craigellachie Hotel, at the same table in the bar – only this time we weren't driving.

There was a two-piece band playing traditional music, and we were in the musicians' corner, so it was hard to focus on the food. We retreated upstairs to the Quaich Bar, found a comfortable corner and settled down

with a dram of the establishment's most popular whisky, the Aberlour 10-year-old. Whisky glasses are tulip-shaped and your dram is served to you with a jug of water for the whisky, plus two glasses of water.

Our backdrop was shelf upon shelf of different whiskies. It was fascinating to read the labels, but we unfortunately only had time for one



In the Quaich Bar, Claudia and Peter enjoy the very popular Aberlour 10-year-old


drink; afterwards, we headed back to the motorhomes at the campsite.

Exploring Aberlour

The following morning I really should have been busy anchoring down my belongings for the drive to Carlisle, but red squirrels are distracting little creatures – and who knew when I would see one again? I watched his antics while I drank my tea.

He eventually scampered off, and I texted Peter to say I'd meet him at the Walkers biscuit factory in Aberlour. It seems we are both partial to shortbread.

In Aberlour proper, it is easy to park on the roadside; there's also a car park by what was once the railway station and is now a café.

There are several interesting shops in Aberlour. In 3 Bags Wool we found everything you'd need to make rugs, 

jumpers and more. It specialises in 'thrums' - the byproduct from Scottish weaving mills, for which you need to use giant knitting pins and crochet hooks.

If you are touring with someone who isn't the least bit interested in whisky, you could drop them here to take a course in felting, rugmaking or whatever took their fancy. It's a brilliant little place, and I could have stayed all day.

Across the road is Perfect Scents, which sold whisky soap - of course it did. For all things specialist food and drink, there is the Speyside Larder: it's a wonderful emporium of local produce, including beers and whiskies, and gifts. For more humdrum groceries, there is the Co-op.

Aberlour has its own distillery and we popped into the visitor centre for a miniature or two of its 10-year-old and a whisky measure (after all, we don't want to overdo it).

My final stop was the churchyard; I was actually heading for the ornate steel bridge behind it, but was waylaid by the inscriptions on the gravestones. These gave the usual name and dates, but also the deceased's occupation and/or how they met their demise and where.

One chap was a haematologist, another a tea planter in India, another a bank agent, another a boot maker and yet another a chauffeur at Ballindalloch Castle. These snippets of personal information gave a real sense of the people and the place.

Heading for the border

We had dilly-dallied too long; it was time to head for the border. We were meeting again at the Dandy Dinmont Caravan and Camping Site in Carlisle.

The drive was just as enjoyable as that of a few days before, with the occasional stop in a layby to take a photo of the Cairngorms.

The next day was just as good; I got to see the gorgeous Lakes and Dales and made frequent stops: including one at Tebay Services, which has a great deli and gift shop, and one at a truck stop to top up on AdBlue. I had really enjoyed this too-brief tour, and the drive, although long, had been a pleasure. There's a new tourist route, the NE 250, which takes in Speyside, Deeside and the east coast; I'm looking forward to returning soon to tackle another of its sections. ☺

DID YOU KNOW THAT...

Barrels can only be used four times during whisky production, and are toasted to caramelise the wood sugar. A certain amount of whisky is lost from barrels through evaporation - the 'angel's share'



Clockwise from main Claudia shops for thrums and needles in Aberlour; Peter picks up useful miniatures to fill with a choice of whiskies; historic gravestones in the local churchyard; the Aberlour distillery visitor centre





TOUR ESSENTIALS

Way to go

We took the M6, A74, M80, A9 and A95.

Where we stayed

Lowther Holiday Park

Eamont Bridge, Penrith, Cumbria CA10 2JB

Tel 01768 863 631

Web www.lowther-holidaypark.co.uk

Open 1 March-26 November

Pitches 47

Charges Pitch+2+hook-up £26-£35

Lowther Holiday Park is huge, mainly made up of statics and seasonals, with 47 touring pitches. There's a supermarket and a bar/restaurant, which has a family room, play area, games room and beer garden. There are two washblocks and a laundry room. This site, not far off the M6, is a great overnight stop. Late arrivals are taken until 10.30pm.

Speyside Gardens Caravan Park

Aberlour Gardens, Aberlour AB38 9LD

Tel 01340 871 586/07960 831 067

Web www.speysidegardens.com

Open 30 March-28 October 2018

Pitches 34 (16 are hardstanding, all have 10A hook-up)

Charges Pitch+2+hook-up £24-£26

This pretty little site in a five-acre Victorian walled garden is central for visiting whisky distilleries. Facilities include a shop selling snacks, drinks and accessories, and a children's outdoor gym. During our visit, the washblock was about to be demolished, making way for a new facilities block with laundry, dishwashing, a family room and facilities for the disabled. The enclosed garden is dotted with huge pine trees inhabited by red squirrels. Maggie, the site owners' cat, likes to have a nose around your 'van! Hills provide the backdrop and cows, the soundtrack.



Dandy Dinmont

Blackford, Carlisle, Cumbria CA6 4EA

Tel 01228 674 611

Web www.dandydinmont.co.uk

Open All year

Pitches 47

Charges Pitch+2+hook-up £22

This site, close to J44 of the M6, is a great stopover for travelling to and from Scotland. It's a fairly informal set-up. You can arrive up to 9pm, but there's not much light to help you pitch in the dark; we got our instructions by calling the owner. The touring pitches are arranged around half of



Speyside Gardens Caravan Park is set within a Victorian walled garden

a central grass area; the other half is occupied by statics. There are also grass pitches. The small washblock was clean. Note that the site only accepts payment by cash.

Food and drink

Craigellachie Hotel

Victoria Street, Craigellachie AB38 9SR

Tel 01340 881 204

Web www.craigellachiehotel.co.uk

Open All year

This is a wonderful place to spend the evening; the food in the Copper Dog pub is delicious, and there's a good selection of beer, wine and, of course, whiskies. There is music on Wednesdays, Fridays and the weekends in the summer, and Fridays and Saturdays in the winter. Upstairs in the Quaich Bar is a prodigious number of whiskies to choose from, and cocktails are a speciality:

The Spey Larder

96/98 High Street, Aberlour AB38 9QA

Tel 01340 871 243

Stop here to pick up delicious local produce for a Speyside picnic. They sell glasses and crockery, too, just in case you forget to bring the picnic basket.

The motorhome

Benimar Tessoro 494

The four-berth Benimar Tessoro 494 has a Ford Transit base vehicle, which we loved: it made for a quiet, easy drive. Cupholders are sensibly located to the side of the dashboard, rather than in the middle,

and our test vehicle was fitted with DAB radio, Bluetooth connectivity and a sat nav.

Further back, the layout features hugely comfortable drop-down and island beds, and there's a high-spec kitchen to make use of, too. You can read our full Live-in test of the Benimar Tessoro 494 in the May 2018 issue of *Practical Motorhome*.
Web www.marquisleisure.co.uk

Find out more

The Malt Whisky Trail

Web <http://maltwhiskytrail.com/>

For distilleries and food stops

Scotch whisky

Web <https://scotchwhisky.com>

All you need to know about whisky

Speyside Whisky Festival

Web www.spiritofspeyside.com

Celebrating the best whiskies

Visit Scotland

Web www.visitscotland.com

Speyside Cooperage

Web www.speysidecooperage.co.uk

Glen Grant

Web www.glengrant.com

Glenfarclas

Web <https://glenfarclas.com>

Aberlour

Web www.aberlour.com

The Macallan

Web www.themacallan.com

3 Bags Wool

Web www.3bagswool.com

Costs

Fuel (1166 miles).....	£253
Site fees	£120
Food and drink (for two)	£93
Attractions (for two)	£38
TOTAL	£504