

EXCLUSIVE

# Whisky 'shop window' could raise further £100m for industry

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**Exclusive by Scott Wright**  
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Victoria Miller, founder, Sip Seekers (Image: Sip Seekers)

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The Scotch whisky industry could generate nearly £100 million of additional revenue from distillery tours over five years if the number of tourists who visit distilleries as part of their trips rose from two in 10 to three in 10.

The opportunity is highlighted by modelling from **Sip Seekers**, the Scottish technology start-up, which has been likened to the “Skyscanner for whisky tours”.

**Whisky** sales and marketing expert Victoria Miller struck upon the idea for the business after “a pain point I was experiencing as someone trying to book a distillery tour”.

Since launching in December, around 70% of distillery visitor centres in Scotland have signed up to the platform, which is designed to help distillers reach more potential visitors and ultimately generate more income.

The most recent figures from the **Scotch Whisky Association** (SWA) show there were 2.7 million visits to distilleries in 2024, eclipsing the previous record of 2.61 million in 2019. The figures suggest distilleries represent the most-visited tourist attraction in Scotland, with more than 60% of visitors in 2024 coming from overseas and people typically spending £40 to £50 per head on each visit.

However, Ms Miller believes the market continues to offer a huge amount of untapped potential. Based on modelling carried out by Sip Seekers, distillers could raise a further £96m in direct revenue if the number of visits by tourists is lifted from the current two in 10 to three in 10.

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“I looked into how many people, compared with actual tourist numbers, were visiting distilleries,” Ms Miller told The Herald. “The shocking part - or the opportunity - was that only two in 10 overnight visitors are making it to distilleries.

“That feels like a big opportunity. We've worked out that if that could become three in 10, there would be a huge opportunity for additional direct revenue, as well as the ticket price.

“Our long-term ambition at Sip Seekers is to play a part in moving that from two in 10 to three in 10. Our modelling suggests that achieving that could represent around £96m in additional direct revenue for the industry over five years, and an economic opportunity of more than £200m when the wider tourism impact is considered.”

Ms Miller added: “Depending on who you reference, the average spend is around £48 a head at distilleries in direct revenue. But it's also about engagement and entertainment. You need to make sure you're giving people a good experience so they leave with a real passion for the brand. They've been able to speak to you directly for a period of time.”

The Scotch whisky industry in general has endured a challenging period in recent years after the Covid-era spike in sales faded quickly amid a host of geopolitical and economic headwinds. After investing £185m over several years to upgrade facilities for visitors at a range of its distilleries around Scotland, Diageo recently closed the visitor centre at Clynelish Distillery in Brora, following a review of operations.

Ms Miller, who worked in sales and marketing roles with St Andrews distiller Eden Mill, Aceo Spirits and Murray McDavid, the independent Scotch whisky bottler, before launching Sip Seekers, said it was a “shame” the Clynelish visitor centre had closed. But she said the opportunity remains for distillers to tap into the tourist market.

“I appreciate there will be commercial considerations behind the decision that I'm not privy to, particularly in the current market,” Ms Miller said. “My concern is that reacting to pressure on worldwide whisky sales by reducing opportunities for direct-to-consumer engagement risks overlooking the longer-term value of tourism.

“Clynelish is also an interesting example because of its proximity to Invergordon and the significant cruise market coming into the Highlands. There is clearly an opportunity to convert more of those visitors into people seeking authentic Scottish food, drink and whisky experiences.

“The value of a visitor centre shouldn't necessarily be measured solely by what somebody spends on the day. It is also about the lifetime relationship created with that consumer and the wider economic contribution of bringing visitors into rural communities.”

Ms Miller added: “From my experience with Eden Mill – before I had a tourism role – my dad [Paul Miller, co-founder of Eden Mill] would put tour vouchers in every gift box. It was to get people to St Andrews and to come and engage with us directly.

“He recognised that it wasn't just the ticket price we wanted. We wanted people to engage with us and feel part of it. They would then continue to buy, and there was a real loyalty element that he built up.

“You could see when they left that they had a real sparkle in their eye. They felt they had really engaged with the business and were excited about what we were doing.

“A lot of brands appreciate that, but they need to ensure the experience is entertaining. At the end of the day, it's leisure. You're competing with other leisure activities for people's time, so you've got to make it fun and engaging.”

Ms Miller also argued that, as distillers continue to face challenges in markets around the world, “direct-to-consumer tourism” has become “more important, rather than less”.

“Distilleries are effectively the industry's shop window,” she said: “They give brands an opportunity to tell their stories directly, generate high-margin revenue and, importantly, build relationships with consumers who can become advocates for those brands for years afterwards.”

And it is not simply the individual distilleries that benefit from dram fans beating a path to their doors – it is the wider economy of the areas in which they are based. More often than not, these are rural areas.

“More than half of Scotland's distilleries are located in rural areas, so the economic impact extends far beyond what is spent at the visitor centre,” Ms Miller said.

“A distillery visitor will often also stay locally, eat in a restaurant or café, use transport and visit other attractions. **Whisky** tourism therefore has an unusual ability to take visitor spend deep into rural Scotland.

“That is why I'm pleased to see tourism's role as an economic driver, both for the industry itself and Scotland more broadly, increasingly being discussed at industry conferences and roundtables.”

However, Ms Miller said there are still challenges for the whisky visitor industry to overcome to allow it to present a more unified, coherent approach to tourists. Sip Seekers has set out to be part of the solution.

“Fundamentally, we're trying to make Scotland's drinks tourism much easier to discover and book,” she said.

“There are extraordinary experiences available across the country, but they remain fragmented across dozens of websites and booking systems. We want someone to be able to say, 'I'm in Speyside on Saturday, I've got £100- what can I actually do?' and immediately see relevant experiences and real-time availability.

“We now have 65-plus producers on-board and are continuing to develop the platform around real-time availability, location and price filtering and booking integrations.

“The next phase includes continually improving our journey-planning functionality alongside loyalty, gifting/vouchers and last-minute discovery - helping people not only plan before they travel but discover experiences once they're here.”

Sip Seekers is also striving to offer whisky lovers experiences that are a little bit more special than conventional tours. Sip Seekers Unlocked gives enthusiasts the chance to get behind the scenes at distilleries which are usually closed to the public. For example, this month just 10 people will be invited into Aberargie Distillery in Perthshire where they will be able to explore the site's production areas and maturation warehouse, taste new make spirit, and sample Aberargie's newly released whiskies.

Ms Miller said there is an “opportunity to continue evolving what a “distillery visit” means”. “Whisky tourism increasingly competes within the wider experience and entertainment market,” she said. “We are seeing everything from chocolate and cheese pairings to warehouse tastings, drawing whisky directly from casks, filling your own bottle and access to areas normally closed to the public.

“The enormous appetite around events such as the Spirit of Speyside Whisky Festival demonstrates how powerful unique access can be. The opportunity is to create more reasons like that to travel throughout the year.

“That thinking is also behind Sip Seekers Unlocked, which we launched to give consumers access to distilleries and experiences that aren't normally open to the public. It's about creating genuinely special reasons to travel- whether that's behind-the-scenes access, meeting the people making the spirit or experiences that simply can't be booked every day- while opening up an additional revenue opportunity for producers.”

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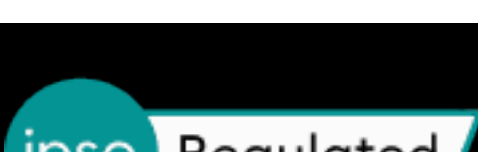
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