



# MEDICUS

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## REBUILDING BEGINS



# Fire, Ice and Luca!

Specialty whisky bars are becoming quite the flavour for connoisseurs of the spirit, writes Robert Reid

It is certainly an inspired, improbable and possibly crazy idea. But it works, and extremely well at that. How better to relax after a long day surfing, or upright on a paddle board, or biking around one of the world's most magnificent islands than with a drink in hand?

Lembongan Island, a tropical gem sitting off the coast of Bali, now has an extraordinary whisky bar – The Howff.

With a hidden entrance below a popular restaurant and part of the upmarket Batu Kerang Resort. The Howff is the dark mystery at the bottom of a very long flight of wooden stairs. With its door slightly ajar the potential visitor can see the red brick walls, the arches, large candles, a deer's head, and even more extraordinary, armour once worn by an ancient noble knight – all combining to entice potential drinkers into the darkened world.

Whoever is responsible for the interior has created a drinking establishment direct from the Scottish Highlands, but with an incredible and slightly humorous Balinese twist.

Unlike any other whisky bar I have visited however, The Howff also offers the attraction of a view that is little short of magnificent, as boats disgorge travellers onto the sand or locals go about their days, untroubled by the stream of day-trippers. You can therefore look out onto the bay, Bali itself on the horizon, or back into the darker club like atmosphere.

Once settled inside you are greeted by Luca, an Italian skilled in creating drinks with a whisky and gin base, trained in a



**He's got skill:** Chief bartender at The Howff, Luca whips up one of his special concoctions.

variety of bars around the world and whose life story will take you through at least two of his incredible creations. By the third you are contemplating buying one of the still affordable

properties on the island.

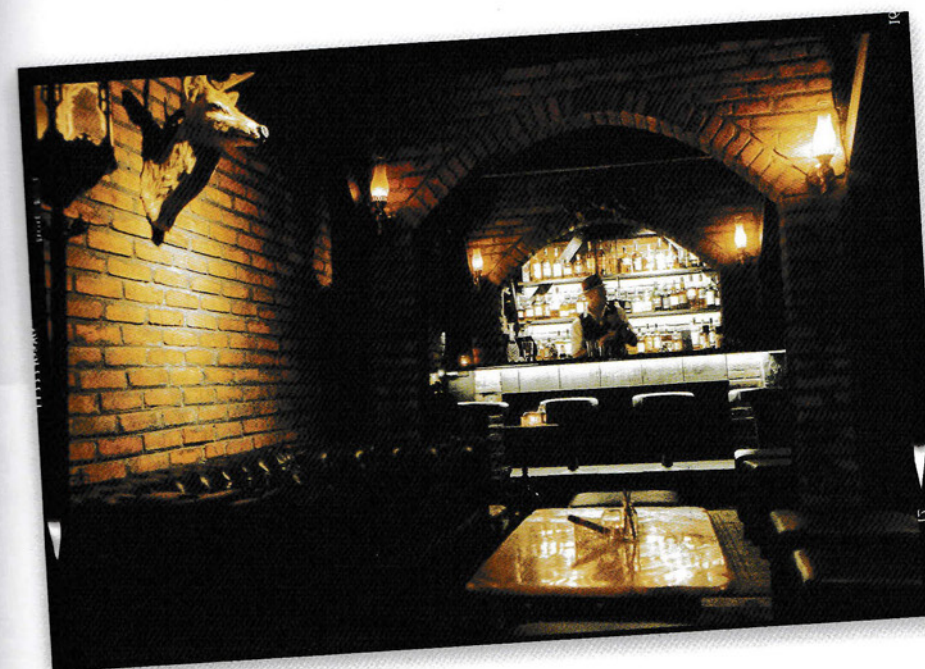
Drinks all have a Scottish twist, in composition as well as name, such as "Robert the Bruce" or "The Potion of Isobel Gowdie," many of them using Luca's skill in wood smoking techniques.

Lembongan Island has grown gently over the last decade as it slowly has become better known mainly by Australians, tired of the hectic and loud intensity of Bali itself.

The only way onto the island is by a few regular boats plying the 30 minute trip, arriving on the pristine sand with a satisfying scrape, ready to release a few dozen day trippers. But with the final boat off the island leaving at 4.30pm, as the evening approaches the island takes on an even more relaxed disposition. Over the last few years Lembongan has attracted a number of skilled chefs, looking for a relaxed environment to raise their families away from the hell of a Michelin starred kitchen. Or even to just enjoy the surf breaks around the island. My suggestion is to start an evening at one of these restaurants, wonderful food at a good price (perhaps at Batu Kerang itself) and then make your way down the stairs to The Howff to experience a little bit of the Scottish Highlands on the edge of a tropical island.

On this latest trip I was fortunate enough to be in London a few days later for business and to meet friends at one of London's best whisky bars and compare the offerings at The Howff.

The Connaught Hotel is certainly beautiful but its whisky bar is just a little too garish, with silver wallpaper and a mixologist who seems to believe that his job is not just to make me a drink but to wave his arms around while curating his mix like semaphoring for help from a British merchant ship during WWII.



**Must try:** The Lossie Haze is crafted from the waters of the River Lossie in north-east Scotland. The Speysid whisky adds a smoothness to this hazy, smoked and wood-planked infused cocktail.

I could grow to like it, but the prices were a shock and the relaxed atmosphere of The Howff was just too recent for me not to miss it all.

Back in Perth a few weeks later, a visit to Varnish on King with a broadcasting friend called.

It's also at the bottom of a flight of stairs, but that's as far as any similarity goes.

An attractive drinks menu certainly, and the lights equally low but the music was seemingly turned up to compensate in some way.

Where was the view, the relaxed atmosphere and hell, where was Luca and his creations?

My recommendation? Book a flight to Bali. It's only four hours after all. ■

**Slainte:** It's happy hour every hour at The Howff.