



Take to the Highlands and live like a Laird

Queen Victoria once spent a week at Inverlochy Castle. She recorded in her diary that it was the loveliest, most romantic spot she'd ever seen. Many years later, when the private dwelling had become a 17 bedroom hotel, King Hussein of Jordan and Queen Noor were such frequent guests they called Inverlochy Castle their 'Scottish Home'. I spent two nights at Inverlochy recently and fell under its spell, too. But although the suites occupied by Victoria R and the King and Queen of Jordan now bear their names, as far as I'm aware, the palatial room I stayed in is still called 'Ben Nevis'.

That aside, I soon became as convinced as their Royal Highnesses that Inverlochy was my very own home in the Highlands. The perception began as the car drew up under the porte-cochere. (I'd arrived in nearby Fort William on the late train from Glasgow and had been met by the hotel's Rolls Royce). Before the Rolls came to a halt, the castle doors had swung open and two stewards were waiting on the steps to greet me - for all the world as if 'Her Ladyship' had finally returned to her estate to the delight of the staff.

Given Inverlochy's crenulated roofline, towers and flags I had expected dungeon décor: suits of armour and slit windows. But in fact the castle is a warm, comfortable country house, a fusion of Scottish Baronial and country villa. A wealthy industrialist built it as a sporting lodge and farm headquarters in the mid-1800s, a time when rich Lowlanders aspired to the life of a Highland Laird. The Great Hall, where I was offered a nightcap, was furnished with a delicate inlaid piano, curlicued gilt mirrors and dark oil paintings. There was a glowing fire in the huge grate. Plump couches and chairs formed cosy conversational groupings and Venetian chandeliers hung from the frescoed ceiling. I found my bedroom to be equally large-scaled with a massive couch in the arm of the bay window, a wing chair or two, a handsome oval table, and an assortment of books, a capacious wardrobe and a huge bed. The luxurious over-sized marble bathroom had both bath and shower.

I slept blissfully late and woke to a massive breakfast, which was wheeled into my room on a white-clothed table. The morning paper had arrived too, in a smart plastic folder with a crest on it. And after breakfast? Visitors at Inverlochy usually play golf or tennis, go deer stalking, fishing, duck shooting or walking

up pheasant - depending on the season. Alternatively, they can do nothing at all in complete comfort. I took the middle ground and decided one would walk one's estate. Staff were delighted to oblige and Andrew, one of the castle's three gardeners was waiting for me in the foyer. An enthusiastic young man with obvious affection for the castle and for his work, Andrew led me in light rain and bright sun down wooded paths, over lush lawns, to multi-coloured flowerbeds, along terraces, into a walled garden and through at least one greenhouse. I don't know a pittosporum from a pikestaff but Andrew's commentary was fascinating all the same. Two and a half hours later we ended with a sweeping descent of grassy fields, past wary cattle, to the castle's idyllic private lake stocked with brown trout.

Back at the castle I left my muddy walking boots in the foyer to be brushed, and took afternoon tea in the elegant white and gold drawing room. Later, like an inquisitive child I explored the castle's passageways. I came upon a billiard room, the walls lined with glassy-eyed stag heads, and a Victorian library where books bore titles like 'An Account of my Rambles in the Highland'.

The evening menu for the hotel's Michelin-star restaurant had been delivered to my room during tea. I rang down with my choices, which included scallops from the Isle of Sky, handpicked wild mushrooms and local pheasant. There was time for a piping hot bath before, dressed in my country-house best, I settled in the Great Hall for a pre-dinner Kir Royale. A steward presented me with a tiered tray of dollhouse-sized appetisers while a wine waiter helped me choose the wine for dinner. At 8 pm, in the splendid dining room, the wine was already decanted and waiting at my table. Five memorable courses arrived in a seamless service without further discussion.

Before leaving for the train back to Glasgow next morning (the fabulously picturesque route would skirt Loch Lomond for many miles) I glanced through the visitor's book. Pages of inscriptions echoed

While you're there

With a day to spare you could enjoy one of the 'Great Railway Journeys of the World', the 84 mile round trip from Fort William, through the incredible scenery of semi-wild Lochaber, to the sea's edge at the fishing village of Mallaig. It's a route Harry Potter fans will have glimpsed before; these are the tracks followed by the Hogwarts Express as it steamed over the 21-arched Glenfinnan Viaduct. From early June to early October, you can travel the route in the 'Jacobite' steam train in carriages similar to those used in the films. It's a popular day's outing, so book as early as possible. For a description of the service visit www.steamtrain.info. The Jacobite operates Monday through Friday throughout the season and also on Sundays from late July to end August.

For reservations, contact the Fort William Station ticket office by telephone during office hours at +44 (0) 1463 239026, or the West Coast Railway Company, Warton Road, Carnforth, Lancashire LA 5 9HX, England. By telephone at +44 (0) 1524 732100 or fax at +44 (0) 1524 735518.

All year round, golf is an excellent excuse for a few days at the castle. There's an 18-hole course opposite the hotel and two extremely scenic 9 hole courses just a short drive away.

Ben Nevis, Britain's highest mountain forms the rugged background to the grassy rolling countryside with its coverts of Scots pine, birch and white oak. See it best from a mountain gondola, which functions year round, to carry

you up 2,150 ft to the Snowgoose Restaurant and bar. From June to September, mountain bike enthusiasts take their bikes up with them and cycle the 4 km downhill to the foot. The mountain is marked with walking and climbing trails of all levels of difficulty from beginner to expert. Ice climbers will find the biggest indoor ice climbing facility in the world at Ben Nevis.

Staying there

Inverlochy Castle, Torlundy, Fort William PH33 6SN Telephone +44 (0) 1397 702177; fax +44 (0) 1397 702953; email: info@inverlochycastle.com; website: www.inverlochycastle.com. Rates range from £290 for two, including breakfast in low season to £550 for a suite in high season (June 1 to Sept.30). No charge for children under 8 in foldaway beds. Dinner is £52.50 per person, wine additional. (Children's meals pro rata.) Dress code applies at dinner.

Getting there

Inverlochy Castle is 3 miles north of Fort William. I arrived there by train from Glasgow in less than four hours. The overnight sleeper, the Caledonian Express, leaves for Fort William every evening from London Euston. The nearest national airport is Dundee. A chauffer-driven car will meet you at your arrival point, rates on request.

Queen Victoria's view - 'the most lovely, and romantic place ever'. Many more guests embroidered the theme of 'magnificent, charming, unforgettable'. But one young visitor summed up Inverlochy with a single word. In the large clear script of a ten-year old she had written simply: 'Awesome!'

