

FROM THE GROUND UP

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN SCOTLAND? IN RECENT DECADES, A FLEET OF BONNY OUTSIDERS HAVE SWOOPED IN, OPENING AMAZING PLACES THAT HAVE ELEVATED THE WHOLE HOTEL CONVERSATION, NOT JUST IN THE HIGHLANDS BUT BEYOND. A GRAND JURA ESTATE IS THE LATEST MONEY-NO-OBJECT VISION. STEVE KING TELLS THE TALE







THE SCOTTISH ARE A PROUD, PERCEPTIVE PEOPLE. The loveliness of their countryside has not escaped their notice. Yet it has often taken the enthusiasm of outsiders to remind locals of the splendours beyond their doorstep. The classic case in point is Prince Albert, a German who, as Queen Victoria's consort, joyfully unleashed his own inner Highlander when he bought Balmoral Castle in Aberdeenshire in the middle of the 19th century, succumbing entirely to notions of rolling glens and snow-capped Munros, the dreamy landscape dotted here and there with turreted castles and populated by heavily antlered deer, noble huntsmen and

everything. The sumptuous simplicity of its interiors gave rise to a new stylistic designation, Scandi-Scot; and the fact that it adjoins an even larger estate, Glenfeshie, in the – not uncontroversial – process of being 'rewilded', only compounded its appeal. Glenfeshie and Killiehuntly belong to a Danish couple, Anne and Anders Holch Povlsen, and are part of their constantly expanding Wildland portfolio, which includes Aldourie Castle on Loch Ness and Lundies House in Sutherland. It would be unfair to characterise the hotel aspect of their project as insignificant; yet the Povlsens' primary consideration appears to be land management on a grand

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fine-featured lassies in tartan sashes reeling en masse to tunes piped by twinkly-eyed chaps of loyal regimental aspect.

Tartanmania, the craze that Albert set off, is still very much with us. If anything, it has gained fresh impetus in the past few years with the arrival of several top-notch hotels – all, as it happens, owned or operated by foreigners. Never before have there been as many fancy places to stay in the Highlands and islands to which a personal invitation from a member of the royal family is not required.

The turning point was the opening of Killiehuntly in 2016. This outwardly humble farmhouse and cottage near Kingussie changed

scale. Today they own more of Scotland than any other private individuals. That this is possible points to some of the more practical reasons behind the current renaissance: the availability of large amounts of attractive property and the government's welcoming attitude towards investors. Such things do not explain the success of the Wildland scheme; but nor are they irrelevant.

The Povlsens' introduction of a contemporary, metropolitan design sensibility into remote parts of the nation initiated a shift, lifting the whole scene up by its kilt hose, that was soon reflected in the ways certain other traditional Scottish country houses

Above from left: billiards table in Ceilidh Barn at Ardfin; bedroom in Jura House. Opposite, clockwise from top left: boot room, and kitchen in Jura House; bathroom with salvaged Art Deco bathtub in The Quadrangle; bedroom in Jura House. Previous pages, from left: Ceilidh Barn; Ardfin grounds and golf course

WHERE TO STAY





were tweaked. The Glen Affric Estate, which two years ago became part of the (German-owned) Oetker Collection, though still cast in the classic Highland-lodge mould, has been refashioned as a paradigm of low-key outdoorsy chic. Even dear old Gleneagles, since being taken over by The Hoxton's (Indian-born) Sharan Pasricha, has emerged from a radical rethink looking sexier and slinkier than at any point in her long history.

To my mind, though, the most extraordinary expression of the phenomenon is the Fife Arms, a converted pub-with-rooms

recover from tuberculosis. Sadly, its fresh air – and the air can get pretty fresh – did not have the desired effect on Orwell's health. But he did complete his masterpiece *1984* here before he expired. Jura has one road and a population of fewer than 300. It is divided into seven estates, of which Ardfin is one. If you turn left off the ferry, you get to the Astors' place; turn right, you get to Ardfin.

The property was acquired in 2010 by Greg Coffey, an Australian hedge-fund manager. Since then its Victorian villa, Jura House, has been transformed inside and out. So have the

THE ISLAND IS NOTED AS THE PLACE WHERE GEORGE ORWELL WENT TO RECOVER FROM TUBERCULOSIS AND COMPLETED HIS MASTERPIECE '1984'

in Braemar. The creation of Swiss gallerists Manuela and Iwan Wirth, it would, with its brilliant combination of fine art, wit and whimsicality, be impressive anywhere. In this village – hitherto best known for hosting the Highland Games' Braemar Gathering – it is hallucinogenic. I can think of no better demonstration of what good taste, imagination, sensitivity and a more or less unlimited budget can achieve, even in the middle of nowhere.

And now there is Ardfin.

Depending on where you start from, Jura is a flight or two from the west coast followed by a ferry and a drive. Though ravishing even by the high standards of the Inner Hebrides, the island is perhaps more famous as the place where George Orwell went to

nearby farm buildings, known as The Quadrangle. And then there is the small matter of the new golf course, which is already being talked about as one of the best in the world. The estate will open in April 2020, with 10-room Jura House available on an exclusive-use basis and The Quadrangle, with its 13 rooms and two two-bedroom apartments, operating like a conventional hotel.

There is enough distance between the two to maintain complete privacy. You could loll about the house for days without setting foot outside. By contrast, there is something about the arrangement of the hotel's spaces that not only necessitates interaction with other guests but also encourages it. The Atrium, the main dining and bar area – a sprawling, open-plan affair with

Above from left: entrance to Ceilidh Barn; the Jura House morning room with a mullion window that looks out to the coast

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a glass ceiling that floods the place with light in the daytime – has a magnetic effect. I imagine part of the fun of a stay at Ardfin will have to do with the random encounters that occur at the bar or over lunch and supper. Or, if not there, then in the next-door Ceilidh Barn, which is not a barn at all but a wonderful long room with enough space for a vast dining table, billiards table and dozens of squishy sofas, armchairs and window seats.

What house and hotel have in common is the astounding beauty of their seaside location and the tremendous charm of

wander the estate's 12,000 acres; sit down with a book by a window in the Ceilidh Barn overlooking the water. Or play golf.

The golf course is Ardfin's trump card. In fact, it trumps Trump. It blows a big fat raspberry at Turnberry. I took a tour with head greenkeeper Simon Crawford, who explained the attributes that make it so remarkable. The ingenious design; the devilish difficulty introduced by its cliffside situation; the fact that its immaculate fairways and greens are maintained without pesticides or toxic chemicals. His enthusiasm was contagious. But I did not need

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their interiors. Louise Jones, a London-based designer, has packed them to the rafters with irresistible good vibes. Yes, there are familiar elements that tend to go with the territory – antlers, grandfather clocks, tartan. The looms of the woollen mill on the neighbouring island of Islay were kept busy more or less around the clock for the duration of the Ardfin renovation. But Jones's endlessly varied use of ticking stripes, vintage materials, Liberty London prints, wallpapers by Nicholas Herbert and florals fabrics by Jean Monro and Décors Barbares means there is never a dull moment. The effect is as invigorating as a stiff dram of Jura malt.

According to the season, you might shoot or stalk, or spot dolphins; contemplate the human condition in the walled garden;

a lot of convincing. The whole thing is beautiful, almost as much an art installation as a sporting facility. It seemed fitting that the boathouse at the 12th hole is the place where, in 1994, the KLF, an experimental music duo of an admirably philosophical disposition, set fire to a million pounds in cash. A delightful gesture – yet one whose calculated grandiosity flames out into insignificance against the genuine grandeur of the Scottish wilderness. 7

Ardfin has doubles at The Quadrangle from £1,080 and two-bedroom apartments from £6,000, full board. Stays at Jura House cost from £20,000 per night for a minimum of two nights, including activities. ardfin.com

Above from left: bedroom in The Quadrangle; secret door in the Jura House morning room that leads to a bedroom, the breakfast room and kitchen