

GREAT SCOT!

Captivating wildlife, waterfalls, castles galore — you'll be mighty impressed by deepest Perthshire

by CAROLINE PHILLIPS

FINGASK Castle hoves into view up a long drive lined with sweet chestnuts. It is a fortified house with parts dating from 1594 — and has been considerably altered over the years.

It is perched on a steeply sloping Perthshire hillside with eye-rubbing views of the Carse of Gowrie and River Tay, and is an hour's drive from Edinburgh.

The air is fresh, and its silence makes any mindfulness app seem noisy.

Helen Molchanoff — a white Russian emigree and wife of the castle's owner, Andrew Threipland — appears in a repurposed opera costume (a handknitted woollen dress with a tall) to set the table for lunch outside under a blue sky. The Threipland family has owned the castle intermittently for nearly four centuries.

'Would you like to try my homemade kombucha?' asks a guest, a University of Aberdeen professor, who's bought a case of the fermented tea with him.

I'm here solo, staying in 19th-century Gean Tree — the castle's former laundry turned two-bedroom cottage with roaring fire — which overlooks a field of Shetland ponies. There's also accommodation in stable-block cottages; a converted boat house; potting sheds; a castle bridal suite; or Sir Stuart's House, a modern six-bedroom lakeside property.

NEARBY there are waterfalls and natural pools for bracing swims. Quiet lochs for trout fishing. And forested braes and Highland glens for blustery walks, on which you can spot red deer, peregrine falcons and golden eagles.

On my first evening, I play billiards with cabinet-maker and fellow guest David Young, on an Edwardian table in a converted barn (as he distracts me with photos of a chessboard he made).

Next morning, I do laps, teeth chattering, in the outdoor pool, and walk on the estate's 240 acres — with surreal skew-whiff yew topiary, Chinese bridge, and sculptures of Robbie Burns's characters. I'm accompanied by

Peter, 20, the eldest of Andrew's second brood. I'm not partial to shoes, he says, ambling barefoot.

I bag a peek inside the castle with pianist/composer and guest, Peter Cowdrey, who's working on a birdsong concert to be performed in the walled garden. We find a vaulted guardroom, as well as a Russian Orthodox chapel in a former 15th-century kitchen. The priest said we couldn't allow our dogs in, and I replied 'What about the Nativity?' chuckles Helen.

There's also a 20% subscription mural with 57 individuals — from Caroline Dawnay, literary agent, to Harry Wood, a cat. 'People pay £2,000 to be added to it. Proceeds go to the Fingask Follies charity.'

Ah, the Fingask Follies — a rollicking, politically incorrect revue. When there's no pandemic, it takes place annually in the

castle's Long Gallery. This August it's in the garden pavilion. 'The Follies add to the sum of human happiness,' says regular Alexander McCall Smith, author of *The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency*.

One day I head to Rait village, which borders the estate. Here, The Tufted Duck serves a full Scottish breakfast (£10, including Stornoway black pudding).

I scour the Rait Antiques Centre, in a former farm steading, and find brown furniture, a copper kettle and a Toby jug. 'Och, do they do sat-nav directions for inside my shop now?' asks the owner, as my phone starts talking. When snowy, Fingask folk toboggan to Rait.

I then buy organic yellow chard and kohlrabi from a horsebox at nearby Guardswell Farm, putting cash in an honesty box. In its stylish pop-up I discover mohair

socks, spalted applewood spoons, and 'the definitive moon-planting manual'. 'You must try stovies (a Scottish leftovers dish) before you return home,' urges owner Anna.

Afterwards, I head to Kinnaird, where Kinnaird Castle looms bossily. The Threipland baronets (including Sir Stuart, physician to Bonnie Prince Charlie) sleep in the village's graveyard.

Further afield, I come upon distilleries aplenty, and Cairn O'Mohr, which brews wines using berries, wild flowers and leaves (anyone for oak leaf wine?), as well as Megginch Castle, where a weekly farmers' market is held in the 18th-century gothic-style courtyard.

Finally, I visit Scone Palace — the crowning place of the Kings of Scotland, including Robert the Bruce and Macbeth — and enjoy its maze and white peacocks. 'In



Awe-inspiring scenery: Family-owned Fingask Castle sits in 240 acres. Inset, a red deer



the 19th century, the Threiplands and butler used to hill-walk to Scone for dinner,' says Andrew. 'It's only nine miles away.'

TRAVEL FACTS

GEAN Tree Cottage is priced from £370 per week at fingaskcastle.co.uk. Fingask Follies tickets from £35 in August. The Birdsong Saturday concert is on July 3, with tickets priced from £11.