

Guests at
Skibo Castle
are treated
like royalty,
but is owner
de Savary a
feudal lord
to his staff?



UP TO THE MARK: Skibo Castle chambermaids (£3.25 an hour and Edwardian frills to be worn) working in a guest bedroom

Upstairs

ENTREPRENEUR Peter de Savary is driving me at 120 miles an hour in his bottle-green Ferrari down a country lane. He is being laddish.

"I hope you've been to the lavatory," he says. "Because even in second gear, you'll have an orgasm."

We arrive, without hitting anything, at the golf house of his Carnegie Club at Skibo Castle, Scotland. It is here by the Dornoch Firth that guests can watch dolphins and seals and indulge in falconry, shooting, golf and salmon fishing.

It is also from this secluded 7,500-acre estate that the paparazzi have been locked out amid press reports of Michael Douglas, Jack Nicholson and Mick Jagger staying here. (Jagger never came.)

PDS, as the millionaire businessman is known, has kept his famous guests away even from his club members, who pay £2,000 a year.

Despite his protestations, I march over to Douglas's discreet table. And, yes, I am invited to join Mr Fatal Attraction and his very rich friend for an intimate lunch, about which more later.

I'm here to investigate the club Upstairs And Downstairs. For it was also last week that an industrial tribunal criticised de Savary for "humiliating and intimidating" young chef Jason Gill, a former employee, and awarded Gill £3,400.

Gill told the tribunal of the intolerable hours and conditions and how de Savary admonished him in front of the other staff, saying the platter of processed cheese and ham he had produced was "below motorway service station standard".

Then there were the tales in the press of how three housekeepers have left since January this year and how employees rarely stay more than three weeks. It seems that the swashbuckling entrepreneur has problems with the serfs.



LUNCH DATE: Michael Douglas

By Caroline Phillips

Pictures: Mark Kehoe

The Upstairs part of Skibo Castle, the former home of steel magnate and philanthropist Andrew Carnegie, is idyllic. Library with leather-bound tomes. Standard bed-chamber (£485 a night) large enough to throw a javelin in and a feather bed so high I get vertigo.

De Savary is in the hall, hectoring a servant for failing to relieve a guest of her golf clubs. "Send her up a bottle of champagne. And it comes off your budget," he booms. The servant doesn't know if de Savary is joking. Nor does the guest.

"Joke, JOKE, J-O-K-E," he explains later, his voice so adenooidal that it sounds as if he has caught a South African accent. "An acceptable way of pointing out to my staff that I never want to see guests carrying their own golf bags."

Now it is time for pre-dinner drinks. The club encourages guests to eat communally. The celebs are dining privately. "Put away your



WOBBLING: Jack Nicholson

notebook, it's Non U," instructs de Savary, who is wearing a claret velvet smoking jacket with braid fastenings, stone jeans and a pyjama shirt.

We are led into the baronial candlelit dining hall by a piper. Butler James appears with a note on a silver salver. "The chef has informed me he will be unavailable to see you during dinner," it reads.

It is obvious that Downstairs, exhausted scullery maids and undermaids are setting fires, washing up and scouring privies with hands too hard to blister.

I go into the kitchen. Chef Donald Munro is beaming genially.

Jane Pettit, a waitress on a Government training scheme, grins because she served Jack Nicholson breakfast in the kitchen. And that's not all. The celeb party comprises Shep Gordon, who is Mr Bigger Than Everybody at Paramount and Woody Johnson, aka Mr Baby Oil.

And, of course, Mr Fatal Attraction. The Big Four. They're all delightful. Oh, and de Savary, they all say, is a demanding but fair boss.

It is 10pm. Upstairs, the Big Four



DOWN IN THE DEPTHS: Below-stairs staff taking a break at Skibo — they insist Peter de Savary is a “demanding but fair” boss

downstairs

and de Savary are still dining in Mr Carnegie's study. The Big Four are drinking 1975 Margaux and 1976 Californian Jordan. They eat warm scallops and roast venison and talk about American politics and the crisis of drugs and children. Then they smoke pre-Castro cigars, Ramon Allones at £200 each.

Jack Nicholson walks past like a wobbling werewolf. He doesn't notice me. I wonder why the press always calls him a hellraiser.

NEXT day de Savary is charming. I question him relentlessly and he gives me a silk scarf. How do you feel about your bad press? “I don't have one.” Are you a bully? “No, I'm a kind, sympathetic person.”

Britain's worst feudal lord? “Categorically not. I'm a very human employer.”

“An egomaniac?”

“I'm not an egomaniac but I have a huge ego which I don't take seriously.”

Thoughts on the tribunal? “I don't agree with any of their findings or their excessive award.”

Three housekeepers have left since January? “Balderdash. I've created 100 new jobs.”

We go Downstairs. In the kitchen, Shep Gordon is cooking ginger and onion soup. He wants it included in the Skibo Castle recipe book. Michael Douglas stands by the stove.

And what about that lunch with Mr Fatal Attraction and Mr Baby Oil? Well, Michael asks me about Scottish nationalism and talks about his anti-nuclear beliefs and his love of Mexico. Oh, and the awful British press.

When we leave, de Savary drives me at three miles an hour in a bottle-green golf buggy down a country lane. And I don't have an orgasm.



BRIAN ARIS

KING OF THE CASTLE: Peter de Savary admits he has a huge ego, but doesn't take it seriously