

ESCAPE TO FARR ESTATE IN SCOTLAND

By Caroline Phillips



Go in spring and you'll see deer gambolling on the lawns. In summer, the days are long and the light bright for striding across heather-carpeted hills and for lazy days fishing on its loch. In autumn, there's bracing wild swimming.

Close your eyes and imagine spruce and pine trees dappled in snow. Or walk through the wardrobe and you'll find a picture-perfect scene of virgin snow-capped hills, ancient monkey-puzzle trees sprinkled with white powder beside icy lakes. Yes, in winter it's like Narnia or a winter wonderland. Idyllic, no?

This is the Farr Estate, a luxury Highland retreat near Inverness, Scotland (just half an hour's drive from the airport). The property is hidden away on a beautiful 12,000-acre estate and opened its doors only a year ago to (paying) guests — having previously been used solely by its owners, the Mackenzie family, since 1880.

It is now available for everything from exclusive use (take a party of up to 24) to romantic à-deux getaways or solo forays, using all or some of the three parts of the property: Farr House (8 bed), Loch Nest (one double) and Garden Cottage (sleeps six).



VIDEOS



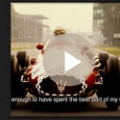
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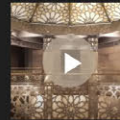
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It's early days but it's already luring the Mackenzie clansmen from the States searching for their roots, Spaniards who are keen on hind stalking and Greeks who like to shoot. Not to mention Japanese wishing to sip Speyside and Drumguish single malts and shop for cashmere and tartan. (For armchair-in-front-of-a-roaring-peat-fire purchases, there's the estate's own Mackenzie tartan and Farr tweed).

A little bit of history now. HRH the Duke of Gloucester (third son of King George V) lived in the original Farr House. Photographs and drawings of it on the walls show a Georgian stately home that was castellated in Victorian times. It was then (purposefully) razed to the ground in the sixties: the upkeep with all that dry rot, damp and massive roof proved too expensive.

Farr House — in its new incarnation — is composed of a former tenants' hall and chapel from 1891; then there's the Garden Cottage (erstwhile Victorian home of the estate gardener) and Loch Nest (a self-contained annex converted in 2016).

I'm sitting in the erstwhile chapel turned drawing room of Farr House chatting to Lucy Ogilvie, née Mackenzie. The eldest of five sisters, she runs the property with her husband, Andrew. "Dad said he used to have to kneel there and pray," says Lucy, pointing to an upholstered armchair. Far from being a chilly chapel, the room is now book-lined, wood-panelled and with a roaring log fire.



There are family books from the 1700s and ones with beautiful plates of game birds, ancient Bibles and swords from the Crimea. "My great great, great grandfather was General Higginson, who fought in the Crimean War," explains Lucy. The family crest, 'Always Faithful,' is etched on the stained glass window.

Lucy's grandfather was Page of Honour to King George V and the portrait above the fireplace in the drawing room is of him (her granddad) at the Coronation. "All those robes and garments were in our dressing-up box when we were little," says Lucy, laughing.

We wander round Farr House together, a place so large that our dog needs no further exercise. There are 18th century Mackenzie portraits in the dining room, Lucy's old Edwardian school desk upstairs, a Victorian washstand with a marble top and bowl sink, and an antique portrait of a railway engineer, William Mackenzie, who lived in the mid-1800s. In an upstairs corridor, every clan of Scotland is represented in Victorian prints. (Tip: bag the ground floor powder-blue room with its chandelier and en-suite with a claw-foot bath).

There's also some contemporary dash in the décor with glass-bowl bathroom basins, funky tiles and squishy sofas and armchairs, plus seating for 18 on tartan dining chairs so welcoming you won't want to get up.





So what of the activities? You can go fishing on Farr Loch at the end of the driveway. Or go on off-road Land Rover tours and have a lunch of game terrines and homemade fruitcakes in their off-the-beaten-track moorland bothy, in which Lucy lights a fire.

It's a nature lover's paradise. Red squirrels scamper across the lawn and you'll open your curtains to roe deer running across the snow. At other times, stags will be roaring and rutting on the hills. You may even spy golden eagles and ospreys over the loch. There are Peregrine falcons, red kites and sparrow hawks too. Not to mention loads of mountain hares that change colour to white in the winter.

The estate is part of the ancient Caledonian forest with its white fossilised trees — that are thousands of years old — poking out of the peat. And with its pink granite, Ice Age rock formations and sphagnum moss too. There are ancient redwoods and Victorian copper beech.

For those who wish to venture further afield, it's close to Loch Ness with its boat tours for seeking out Nessie. There's the organic Black Isle beer distillery nearby. And Culloden battlefield where there was a Jacobite rising and Bonnie Prince Charlie met his end. Or you may prefer to go to Cawdor Castle, where *Macbeth* was set.

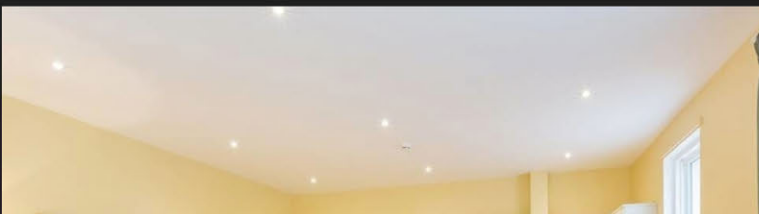


You can dolphin watch on the Moray Firth or go to Findhorn for spiritual sustenance (think angel cards and tarot readings). The Cairngorms National Park, a place of rugged beauty, is just 45 minutes away — for hiking, rock climbing and skiing. It's hard not to love the area.

When I was at Farr House, however, it was for our daughter's 21st — it's the perfect party venue for Edinburgh University students. We managed a short hike and played in the snow. The Oglivies organised a treasure hunt in the grounds, which caused much mirth.

Our focus, though, was a lazy, foodie weekend. For those who are gastronomically inclined, the Farr Estate is heaven-meets-paradise-with-a-smattering-of-one-of-the-best-days-of-your-gourmet-life gently sautéed with a sprinkling of 'this can't get any better.'

There's flipping fresh brown trout from the loch — after you've nipped out in one of the wooden rowing boats to catch it yourself — ready to be tossed in butter and almonds. There's the best rare-breed piggy you ever did taste — succulent, flavoursome and reared on the estate by housekeeper Wendy, and cooked in a way that puts the 'oh' into slow: 24 hours in the bottom of the Aga.





There are partridge waiting for those of careful aim, and salmon from the River Findhorn — for those fishermen among you, this river boasts deep pools and fast runs. They rear quail on the estate — so bag the birds' teeny eggs for breakfast along with toast slathered with local heather honey. And you'll find forest floors painted gold with chanterelles that Lucy picks in a flat wicker basket and cooks with venison.

Did I say venison? Homemade venison burgers and sausages are made from meat from the estate. Or imagine the most delicious estate-reared haunch that's marinated in red wine and cooked with dollops of home-made redcurrant jelly — created by Lucy's mum — from home-grown, hand-picked fruit. She also makes jams and marmalades. You can buy it in jars complete with the Mackenzie deer's antler crest.

If field-to-vegan-fork is your thing, they grow lots of vegetables and fruit on the estate — not just blackcurrants, raspberries, strawberries and gooseberries but also blueberries — which are like Scottish blueberries. And then there are mountains of fashionable kale — used formerly for pheasant fodder — plus tasty broad beans to fresher-than-fresh mange tous not just with zero miles but with zero yards.

The estate provide chefs who will cook this home produce for you and serve and clear away or, if you wish, Lucy will oversee the saucepans herself: she knows more delicious ways to cook venison than most have had hot dinners. Or you can enjoy self-catering, as we did — but with Wendy at the ready to magic away all the mess.



There's just one other thing you need to know. Unlike many old Scottish houses, Farr House is decidedly 21st century. It boasts not just a wind farm, solar panels, and hydro electricity. There's also a well-equipped kitchen (with mammoth fish kettles to Aga and electric ovens) and there's also snug under-floor heating plus piping hot water and strong Wi-Fi.

Hardly surprising that we scarcely went outside on this visit, is it?

FURTHER INFORMATION

For more information, visit www.farrestate.co.uk, or call +44 (0) 79040 75361 or +44 (0)75355 63565. Prices start from £49.99 for Loch Nest and from £549.99 for Farr House per person per night, based on 16 people staying (Farr House is only let as a whole property).

Caroline Phillips is an award-winning freelance journalist who contributes to publications from Sunday and daily newspapers to glossy magazines and various luxury websites. To see more of her work, go to www.carolinephillips.net.

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