

TRAVEL

ON SAFARI IN DARKEST PERTHSHIRE

Gemma Fraser goes hunting for deer and hare but finds the hot tub and champagne more to her taste

WATCHING the sun go down, champagne in hand, listening to nothing but the sound of the birds and the hypnotic whir of the hot tub, I wish that time could just stand still.

All around us are rolling hills, the stunning views adding to the perfect moment we are in.

It feels like we are a million miles away from the stresses of everyday life. But we have not had to travel hours to get to some far-flung retreat - the best part of this is that it's on our very own doorstep.

The Mains of Taymouth country estate is a perfect blend of luxury, relaxation and as little or as much activity as you desire in Highland Perthshire.

The 120-acre estate of four and five-star self-catering cottages, houses, villas and apartments is an ideal

resort for couples, families or groups of friends wanting an escape.

It has something to suit all tastes on site - golf, horse riding, spa treatments, mountain biking and guided picturesque walks to name just a few of the plentiful options, and the estate is dog-friendly too.

Nestled on the edge of Loch Tay, it is also ideally located for watersports enthusiasts, with cruisers, rowing boats, canoes and kayaks all available for hire.

On arrival, we are greeted with a warm welcome by friendly staff at the main reception, who make it clear they are happy to help with all estate-related enquiries, as well as being eager to double up as local tour guides.

Our weekend retreat is the fantastically luxurious Granary Court, a four-bedroom cottage in the estate's quaint and character-laden courtyard.

Kitted out to the highest standard, Granary Court, which was renovated in 2009, blends fantastic 21st century interior design into a building which was once the home farm to Taymouth Castle. It really is stunning.

The open staircase leads down to the kind of kitchen you see only in magazines, and then out into a sizable private garden, which boasts the hidden gems of the property - the hot tub and sauna. After a tour round the

rest of the accommodation, which offers ample space for families or groups of friends, sleeping a total of eight - with the room on the top floor offering more floorspace than most city centre flats - we head straight for the hot tub and crack open the bubbly to celebrate the start of our break in style.

Highland Perthshire is a fantastic location with an abundance of outdoor activities on offer.

We opt to take in a bit of scenery through an organised tour with Highland Safaris, a short drive from the estate.

A bustling hive of activity and Land Rovers, we embark on a deer feeding experience while awaiting our chariot

and kilted tour guide for the afternoon.

Once seated comfortably in the old-style Land Rover, we are given an insightful description of the countryside as we travel 'on safari' to our Highland location.

The views are breathtaking, and despite the blustering wind at 3000ft, we get out to take in this awesome scenery and nature that we very rarely get the chance to be so close to.

On good days, our safari ranger tells us, you can be lucky enough to see red deer running round in front of your very eyes, but on today's trip we can only just about see a stag through binoculars.

But we do witness a particularly fearless mountain hare on the hunt for food and seemingly oblivious to the three pairs of eyes following its every move.

We are then treated to a visit to a bothy, acquired by Highland Safaris as an added bonus for its tourists, but which is left open for hill-walkers to enjoy too.

It's a fantastic little snug, with a fire and blankets to warm us up on this particularly chilly and windy day.

And another element which warms up our cockles is the little nip of whisky our ranger has brought for us - a very much welcomed traditional tipple in this traditional Highland setting.

After our safari adventure we decide a relaxing evening in our luxurious pad is called for, so we put some music on the iPod docking station and sit and chat while cooking in the dream kitchen.

After dinner, we retire to the comfortable sofas on the upper level and relax in front of the roaring log fire, so chilled out it's hard to keep our eyes open.

After a peaceful sleep - it's amazing what country air, no traffic noise and complete darkness can do for you



TRAVEL FACTS

■ Highland Safaris www.highlandsafaris.net 01887-820071 to book.

■ Mains of Taymouth prices start from £200 for a one-night stay in a Maxwell villa, £250 for a one-night stay in a two-bed Maxwell or Gallops with prices from £700 for one week stays. All Mains cottage properties are available for a minimum seven-night booking during July and August. Short breaks are available outwith these summer months. The Smiddy is priced from £970 for a one-week stay. Visit www.taymouth.co.uk for the latest special offers, availability and current prices or call the Mains of Taymouth Country Estate on 01887-830226 to book accommodation.



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MAIN EVENT: Taymouth country estate. Picture: ROB McDOUGALL

- we rise early, keen to make the most of our break.

I have booked myself in for a riding lesson. Having never been on a horse since I was a child, I have a certain amount of trepidation, but that is immediately banished on my arrival at the stables, just a stone's throw from the courtyard.

The stable manager talks me through what we will be doing - a gentle trek through the beautiful woodland, along the banks of Loch Tay.

It's a fantastically energising experience, and the competence and confidence of the stable manager, who is in front of me on her own horse, rubs off on me as I too start to feel comfortable on my horse.

She even gives me a quick lesson in how to canter then leaves me to put my new skills into practice - which is thoroughly invigorating and highlights why the stables at Mains of Taymouth are so popular both with guests and locals alike.

After my riding lesson we spend the day walking round the grounds of the estate, wandering through the pretty village of Kenmore, and having a leisurely lunch in the garden whilst dipping in and out of the hot tub.

In the evening we have a lovely meal in the estate's Courtyard Restaurant, and settle down with a couple of drinks in the relaxing lounge area afterwards. It is a lively hub on the estate, with many of the guests popping in and out all day for snacks and drinks.

We retire back to Granary Court and watch the sun disappear from the hot tub for one last time, relaxed and feeling stress-free after our short retreat, and start planning our next visit.