

## Feature

# Who lives in a place like this?

**Whether you fancy a taste of the high life or just want to book a treat, a little luxury once in a while can do you good. Four writers reveal where they'd choose to check in.**

**EVER WANTED to be the laird of your own Highland estate? Well, Ackergill Tower near Wick can help you at least feel like one.**

This exclusive retreat in the far north accommodates those looking for the best of the best when it comes to Scottish retreats.

And while we seem to have an abundance of castles, none is quite like Ackergill. It combines the best of a top class hotel with traditional Scottish hospitality in stunning, centuries-old surroundings overlooking the North Sea.



The aim of Ackergill is to offer an affluent Highland estate and its staff for the duration of your stay.

And the mixture has proved so successful that Ackergill Tower now holds the award for the best UK Travel Venue 2006.

Even approaching Ackergill is a breathtaking experience. Trees part over the main driveway to reveal the majestic 500-year-old keep and its immaculate surrounding gardens. The 40-strong staff line up to greet you in the reception hall with a dram, then you're whisked off to experience the local delights.

These can be just about anything. If the staff can arrange something, they will.

Events manager Lisa Coghill says, "Walking, cycling, surfing, deep-sea fishing, river fishing, shooting, golf, quad-biking, falconry, archery and highland dancing — we organise absolutely everything. Whatever you want to do, we'll try to accommodate you . . . within reason."

Ackergill only accepts groups and with prices starting at £350 per person per night, you'd expect to be treated like a laird.

Lisa explains, "While you're here we want you to be the owner of the castle — that's what the whole experience is about. For example, if some of the group want to play golf, we can arrange for others to go on a nature walk with a local wildlife expert or the kids can have some fun in the kitchen with our chef. "We'll organise everything for the guests if they need it. For instance, if we're having a ceilidh we'll make sure everyone is fitted with kilts."

Each of the rooms in Ackergill Tower contains the original furniture and contents left by the Dunbar family — direct descendants of the old Scots royal line — when it was bought in 1986. So expect 19th century books on the shelves and paintings dating even further back on the walls.



Even though you're closer to the Arctic Circle than to the border between Scotland and England, the weather at Ackergill is surprisingly

mild.

Lisa says, "On the longest day you can play golf at midnight and often guests will have their dinner and go for a round of golf at 10 o'clock."



"We like our guests to have a different experience every day, whether it's a disco in the treehouse (below) after a game of croquet or a walk down the beach lit up by the Northern Lights."

The tower is especially popular with corporate clients and the resourceful staff are experts at organising team-building exercises.

Lisa says, "One group wanted an SAS survival start to their holiday so we organised the local TA to ambush them as they arrived at the castle. After that they were taken to a derelict croft and held prisoner and interrogated."



"The managing director of another company was a real action man. He wanted his company's stay at Ackergill to start with a night sleeping rough near the castle followed by a kayak down the coast in the morning. It isn't all luxury here!"

Talented head chef Kevin Dalgleish has worked at Ackergill for nine years. He creates sublime dishes from locally-sourced produce and vegetables grown on the estate.

Kevin is quite laid back — which helps when dealing with unusual requests.

He laughs, "One Scottish guest had a particular request. Rather than eat from the Laird's table, he wanted something more basic. So I had to quickly drive into Wick to pick him up a mince pie from the local butcher. We're all about looking after the guests!"

**By Steve Gallacher.**

**HARMONY HOUSE is an early 19th century Georgian mansion with two and a half acres of walled gardens, well-located for touring the Scottish borders — and ideal for those who want more economical grandeur!**

It was originally built by James Waugh, a local Melrose joiner, who made his fortune after emigrating to Jamaica. There he created a successful lime plantation before returning home to construct Harmony House for his retirement years.

Nowadays it belongs to the National Trust for Scotland. It has been finely furnished and decorated under the guidance of the Trust's curator, and while it still retains the original grandeur and splendour, modern conveniences have also been expertly blended in, ensuring that guests can enjoy all the comforts of modern living.

Whilst the house itself is not accessible to the public, it is available to rent as one of the self-catering 'connoisseur collection' amongst the Trust's properties. It can accommodate up to 12 people and prices start at £550 for a short break.

The rear entrance door of the house leads to a curved staircase, taking you up to the first floor where you are immediately struck



by the magnificent main staircase spiralling graciously upwards.

The original entrance hall complete with curved ornate ceiling is directly opposite, with the drawing room and dining room to either side. The drawing room is impressive with its superb Jamaican cedar doors and wood panelling. The large ornate fireplace and chandelier also help to conjure up images of guests at the fireside, enjoying drinks after dinner.

The house has three double bedrooms, four twin rooms and a single, all of which are comfortably furnished and decorated in fresh cool pastel colours. The main double bedroom is a delight, boasting magnificent views out over the gardens to the backdrop of the Eildon Hills in the distance. But the hidden gem of the property is a room concealed behind an alcove just off a half-landing — a library, which is the perfect sanctuary from the world.

To the front of the house are Harmony gardens, which open to the public from April to September. There you can wander around the magnificent herbaceous garden and separate kitchen garden, or pop across the road to Priorwood garden, also run by the National Trust, which specialises in dried flowers and has an ancient orchard.

Together with Melrose Abbey and superb local shopping, Harmony House is ideally located for visitors to the Borders and is well worth a visit.

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**By Nigel Young.**

**DESPITE BEING the site of a former monastery, Aberdeen's Carmelite hardly sparks thoughts of frugality or hardship.**

What was once known as The Imperial, and latterly The Grampian Hotel, has been transformed, after an extensive, £2.5 million renovation process, into the Carmelite — a luxurious boutique hotel unlike anything else in The Granite City.

An elegant Victorian exterior — parts of the building date back to the 1820s — now gives way to super-modern surroundings inside. Owned by Edinburgh-based Next Level Group, it's the first of a chain of seven hotels due to open across the UK over the next five years.



"Our whole belief was to create a space and environment where people can really relax," says Richard Muir, the firm's managing director.

Everywhere you look, the old mixes with the modern — and it works.

Brown leather couches and chairs in the lounge and bar areas rub shoulders with 19th century marble pillars and corniced ceilings. The ballroom boasts beautiful stained glass windows — a feature repeated throughout the Carmelite. Tens of thousands of pounds were spent restoring them.

"I see myself as the custodian of this building," enthuses Richard proudly, as he heads upstairs to the hotel's centrepiece, six signature suites.

For those seeking an extra slice of luxury, three of these stunning suites can be booked together, complete with their own private chef!

Only the most tightly coiled guest would have trouble unwinding in such a place. And with an extra



11 executive king rooms and a further 32 refreshed bedrooms available, there's no doubt the Carmelite Hotel scrubs up very well indeed!



Carmelite Hotel, Stirling Street, Aberdeen AB11 6JU.  
Tel. 01224 589101. Prices for suites start at £250 per night.

**By Patrick McFall.**

**TO THOSE looking for luxury further afield, there are few places that offer it as abundantly as Canada — with its railroad hotels.**

Dotted along a route of spectacular scenery is a series of magnificent hotels — among the finest in the world. Each is an architectural gem, and in fact, that was part of the reason some of them were built; to attract travellers to undiscovered areas of Canada, at a time when this country was underpopulated and unexplored.



The hotels are as much worth discovering as the country. They boast an elegance that is rarely found outside fairytales, with their sculpted silhouettes, steep rooflines, and high dormer windows where you half expect to see a wistful princess. However, they are also solid structures that make grand statements announcing clearly that they are here to stay, not just passing through.

Due to the barren landscape the railroad had to pass through, many of the hotels that are dotted along it are secluded. Possibly the most beautiful of these is the Fairmont Banff Springs, which sits majestically at the intersection of three glacial valleys, north of Calgary.

It offers the best of everything, not least the rooms, which range from cosy corner rooms to split-level honeymoon suites, some with spiral staircases, and all with clean air floating in from the mountains, meadows and valleys.

Styled after a Scottish baronial castle, few hotels in the world can rival its opulence. This hotel offers the Diamonds are Forever package, if money's no object, which starts with a limousine ride, ends with the presentation of a half-carat diamond and features a dedicated personal concierge. A snip at just £4005!

If that isn't your glass of Dom Perignon, there are also spa packages that have a local flair, such as the Banff Mineral Scrub and the Rockies Rehydration, for £250 per night and up, per person.

The cream tea business in the railroad hotels grew as they became social venues, and guests at Banff Springs will enjoy the afternoon tea ritual. A specially-blended tea was created for the hotel to take advantage of the fresh mountain water that's so easily at hand. It's made up of Assam, Kenyan, Ceylon and Chinese tealeaves as well as a trio of teas from Southern India. The other ingredients add malt, floral and oaky flavours, that are combined together in the pot for an experience that's more akin to wine than tea!

On the other side of the country from Banff is the Chateau Fairmont Laurier in Ottawa, which looks like something from a romantic film set, with turrets and towers. The Queen, Marlene Dietrich and Nelson Mandela have all stayed here in one of the many high-luxury suites with marble bathrooms, and sometimes even parlours and dressing rooms. Even rooms that are slightly cheaper, on the upmarket Gold Floor, have a private concierge and enough space to play tennis in.

But the afternoon tea is why many people come here and the champagne tea (£23 each) really takes the (finger-sized) biscuit. Diners start with fresh strawberries and warm chocolate fondue, then move on to a menu that includes foie gras and truffle mousse, crab and blue cheese baguette, and blini and caviar.

Each afternoon tea is, of course, accompanied by a brew — 13 types are offered, ranging from Cascade

Peppermint and Jasmine Butterfly to plain old black! The teas are prepared by the tea version of the sommelier. He or she wheels a cart to your table and, almost like wine service, offers samples of leaves to sniff from a deep silver cup; the results are so aromatic they could double up as pot pourri!

Once a customer has selected their brew of choice, hot water is poured from a huge urn onto leaves that nestle in the bottom of a teapot.

Then there's the grande dame of hotels, The Empress in Victoria, British Columbia, an ivy-covered bastion of old-world upper-class living. There's little difference in the tea salon and the afternoon activities to those of 100 years ago, except for the clothing of the diners and the occasional glimpse of a mobile phone.

Tea here costs £24 per person and is straightforward — strawberries and cream followed by a cake stand filled with sandwiches (no crusts, of course), scones and miniature pastries. Cups of tea are topped up frequently, and cocktails are served from a glistening silver tray.

The total bill for two, with champagne, runs close to £80 but it is a not-to-be-missed event most of us will experience only once in a lifetime — unless you've just won the lottery.

**By Amanda Chater.**



**Food**



**Fashion**



**Famous**