

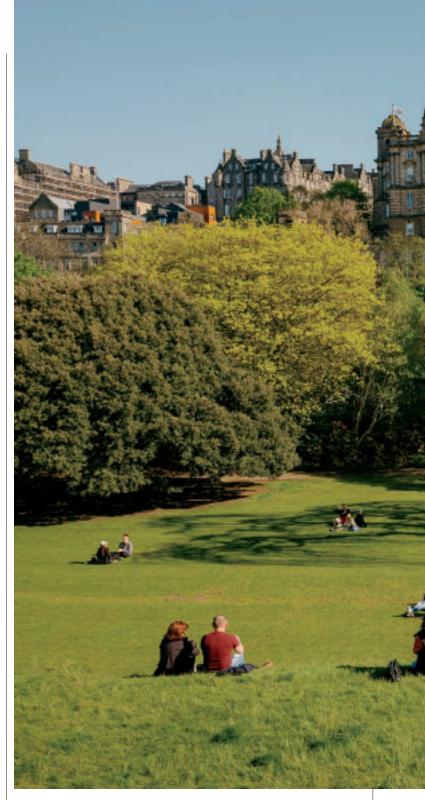
→ Macabre tales, stylish boutiques, and local fare in Edinburgh's Old Town

have a big decision to make right after I wake up at the Kimpton Charlotte Square Hotel: Do I eat the haggis on the breakfast buffet? Scotland's national dish—offal and spices stuffed inside a sheep's stomach and boiled—is beloved by many, but I recently read that it's reviled by 44 percent of Scots. Keeping that figure in mind, I stick to scrambled eggs, while my husband, Matt, happily devours a heap of sheep.

Our hotel is catty-corner from the first minister's

official residence in Edinburgh's New Town—which isn't new at all. Construction in the area began in 1767, after conditions in medieval Old Town had become crowded and unsanitary. Together, the two neighborhoods make up the oldest (and most photographed) parts of the city.

We set off on foot to explore Old Town first, starting with the **Real Mary King's Close**. The 16th-century closes were street-level alleyways leading to vertical tenements that housed hundreds of working- and middle-class families. Some rose 15 stories high, making them the city's first skyscrapers. The closes were partially demolished in 1753 to build the Royal Exchange, and the lower levels were cemented over, but in 2003 this one was reopened to the public. As we walk through the shadowy rooms, guides dressed as various historical residents share stories of



Above: Calton Hill, overlooking Old Town



their lives. Among them is the close's namesake, Mary King, a wealthy businesswoman who eventually gained a seat on the Edinburgh Council and earned voting rights three centuries before the suffragettes. Every so often, a guide yells "gardyloo," parroting the warning call for when sewage was about to be dumped down the close.

Back at street level, we walk to Grassmarket, a former execution ground that

now bustles with shops and restaurants. We meet Sonny, a guide with **Invisible Cities**, which offers walking tours with a twist: Each of the guides has experienced homelessness. Sonny leads a Crime & Punishment Tour, which is less Dostoyevsky and more *My Favorite Murder*, focusing on colorful characters from the city's past. Take Maggie Dickson, who was hanged for murder in Grassmarket in 1724: En

route to the graveyard, her family heard banging inside the coffin. It was Maggie—turns out she had only lost consciousness during the hanging. The judges ruled she couldn't be retried because the physician had declared her dead, and she lived for another 40 years. "She was nicknamed Half-Hangit Maggie," Sonny says.

As we stroll down the **Royal Mile**, which connects Edinburgh Castle to the

Palace of Holyrood House, the seat of the monarchy in Scotland, our guide shares his own story. Raised in a broken home in Glasgow, he joined a gang at 10. "In Glasgow, they'll stab you but then take you to the hospital," he says with a laugh. Once he arrived in Edinburgh, he experienced homelessness for five years, but he eventually got clean and turned his life around. As he leads us past landmarks including







This page, clockwise from above left: Invisible Cities guide Sonny; colorful storefronts on Victoria Street; an artist at work at Dovecot Studios; opposite page: rustic decor at Timberyard

St. Giles' Cathedral and the **John Knox House**, the oldest original medieval building on the Mile, he also points out shelters where he stayed. "I feel much better," he says, "and I just look forward to doing more tours and helping homeless people."

We thank Sonny and walk 15 minutes over to **The Gardener's Cottage** for lunch. Sustainability plays a huge role in Edinburgh's restaurant

scene, and chef Dale Mailley has been at the forefront of the trend since 2012. He favors local and seasonal produce, some of which is grown in the 1836 cottage's picturesque garden. Dining at a communal table in the tworoom space feels like sharing a meal in someone's home, and the kitchen-where two chefs prepare a seven-course tasting menu—is about the size of a postage stamp. Perhaps the tighter the space, the more concentrated the flavors, I think, as I bite into a juicy loin of venison rubbed in fragrant lavender, set in a mound of pumpkin puree, and topped with a Calvados-soaked plum.

After lunch, we cut through Holyrood Park on the way to the city center. We're too full to hike to the top of Arthur's Seat, an extinct volcano 823 feet above sea level and the city's highest point, so instead we merrily wander the park's heather-strewn glens and watch swans glide across its lochs. Matt heads back to the hotel for a swim,

"Victoria Street is said to be the inspiration for Diagon Alley, so it's a magnet for Harry Potter fans; I count at least three magic-themed stores."

and I continue on to Victoria Street, a bow-shaped, cobblestoned thoroughfare with pastel-painted 19thcentury buildings and lots of shops. J.K. Rowling wrote most of the Harry Potter series in Edinburgh, and Victoria Street is said to be the inspiration for Diagon Alley, so it's a magnet for Potter fans; I count at least three magic-themed stores. In search of less witchy wares, I step into Walker Slater. Originating in the Highlands, the brand makes clothing inspired by the colors of the rugged Scottish landscape.





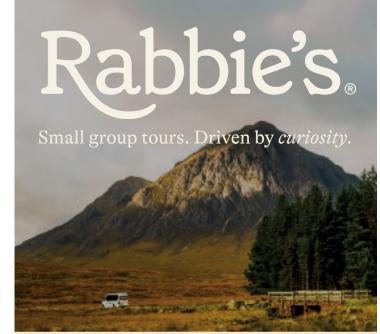
I sift through sharply tailored tartan coats and Harris Tweed suits—my weekend-at-a-country-estate-wardrobe fantasy come true—and end up buying a cappuccino-colored fisherman's sweater.

Next. I head to the nearby Dovecot Studios, a 112year-old weaving workshop and gallery that makes tapestries and rugs for institutions such as the Theatre Royal in Glasgow. Over the years, the studio has also collaborated with renowned British artists such as Chris Ofili and Elizabeth Blackadder to create wool and yarn interpretations of their artworks; from a viewing gallery, I watch master weaver Louise Trotter at work on a rug based on artist Victoria Crowe's painting of a moonlit landscape in Orkney.

By the time I leave, the blustery landscape resembles Trotter's rug. I'm meeting Matt for dinner at **Timberyard**, which was awarded its first Michelin star last March. The 19th-century

warehouse is a monastic space with high ceilings, whitewashed brick walls. and rustic, candlelit tables. "The room is so beautiful we didn't change it," says manager Peter Johnson. "It's the same with the ingredients. If a mushroom is so fresh, we don't add too much to change its essence." As proof, the creaminess of a buttery lobster is enhanced, not overpowered, by the sweetness of golden beets, while toasted fennel seeds and the acidity of gooseberry balance beautifully with the seared turbot.

For a nightcap, we duck into The Spence at Gleneagles Townhouse. Housed in an 18th-century bank, the marble-topped bar, a reference to the old banking counter, sits underneath an original glass dome. Alas, the cloudy night only reflects the gantry lights back at us, but we toast with The Gardener, a teguila, mezcal, and red wine concoction that doubles as dessert, thanks to the pear, sugar, and honey. It's a sweet end to a wonderful day.





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Superb sandwiches, Scottish designers, and an inventive distillery in Leith

> fter a quick, haggisfree breakfast at the Kimpton, we check out and drop our bags at The Balmoral, a grande dame hotel if there ever was one. From here it's just a few minutes' walk to the National. Scotland's national art gallery, which opened in 1859, long kept its Scottish collection in a difficult-toaccess space; as a result, only 19 percent of museum visitors made their way to see those works. A brand-new redesign has doubled the area, though, creating a welcoming gallery that features Scottish pieces from 1800 to 1945,



the most recognizable being Edwin Landseer's The Monarch of the Glen. Although it has morphed into a ubiquitous image on shortbread tins and whisky bottles, the monumental painting of a stag still astounds. I'm also taken by Picturing Landscapes & Framing the City, an exhibition that gathers together paintings of Edinburgh from 1730 to 1930, showing how the city has changed. Many of these hang next to windows facing Princes Street, which is depicted in several of the works, making the city's evolution all the more palpable.

Ready for a bit of modernity, we hop a tram to the waterfront of Leith. The neighborhood, once a busy port, became famous as the location of Trainspotting, the gritty Irvine Welsh novel and subsequent Danny Boyle movie about the lives of junkies and misfits in the 1980s. In the years since, Leith has transformed into one of the city's coolest neighborhoods, filled with Michelin-starred restaurants and quirky shops. Still, the area has managed to keep its edge.

At the sandwich shop **Alby's**, co-owner Natasha Ferguson gives us a little insight into the local vibe. "Leithers like being separate from the rest of the city," she says, citing a 1920 referendum to make Leith a part of Edinburgh; Leithers overwhelmingly voted no, but the council overrode their votes

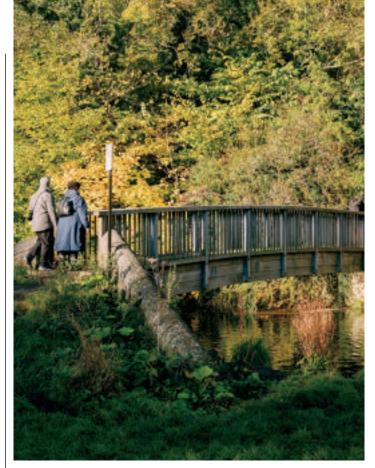
and incorporated the neighborhood anyway. Today, I'm just casting my vote for best sandwich, and the winner is beer-battered smoked haddock smothered in coronation mayo, topped with pickled red onion and masala puffed rice, and served on focaccia slices as thick as my wrist. The chicken thigh and *pakora* with spiced onions and fresh mint is a close second.

Matt and I burn off lunch with a stroll along the Water of Leith, a 22-mile-long river that runs past warehouses. Victorian tenements, and a few surviving Georgian structures. A few minutes' walk from the Royal Yacht Britannia, the royal family's much-visited former personal vessel, we wander into the brand-new **Port of Leith Distillery**, the tallest whisky distillery in the world and the latest of two new whisky producers that became the first to open in Edinburgh in 100 years. (The first was Holyrood, which broke the drought in 2019.) We've just missed the tour, so we make our way to the ninth-floor



This page, from top: the Scottish gallery at the National; a sandwich at Alby's; opposite page: Custom Lane, in Leith







This page, from left: a bridge on the Water of Leith walking path; a cocktail at Nauticus; opposite page: James Stevens and Hugo Macdonald at Bard, their shop in Custom Lane

bar to take in the panoramic city views. The menu champions "new wave" whiskies, featuring more than 200 that are aged less than 10 years. We choose the Fire Water flight, including Port of Leith's two New Makes, which are straight off the still and haven't yet gone into casks for maturation. They're both fiery and fruity and extract a fine burn. The distillery has been nine years in the making, but it's likely a sound investment: The spirit is worth £7 billion a year to Scotland.

We see more of Leith's creative spirit at **Bard**, a shop

showcasing the work of more than 50 Scottish artisans and designers, in Custom Lane, a collaborative workspace and gallery housed in the 1811 Customs Building. Hugo Macdonald, a former design editor in London, and his husband, James Stevens, opened the shop in 2022 to promote the "incredible wealth of Scottish craft and design," which Macdonald says "gets overlooked for fake cashmere scarves and Loch Ness Monster fridge magnets." I'm drawn to clay tea sets, striped lambswool blankets, and antique chairs from Orkney with straw backs. "There's a hardiness and ingenuity to much of our craft traditions here," Macdonald says. "These are pieces to enhance harsh environments and survive repeated use."

The sun is setting, which means it's time for happy hour. We meander over to **Nauticus**, a Victorianinspired pub and cocktail bar founded in 2018 by Kyle Jamieson and Iain McPherson. (The latter also opened Edinburgh's Panda & Sons, which made the World's 50 Best Bars list last year.)

SPEYSIDE WHISKY TOURS

The region of Speyside, once home to thousands of illegal stills, brims with dozens of whisky distilleries to this day. A tasting tour is a quintessential Scottish experience, and three of our Speyside favorites are within a 90-minute drive of The Fife Arms, our Day 3 hotel.

In 2017, master distiller Billy Walker acquired **The GlenAllachie**, a slumbering distillery in Aberlour, and just four years later won World's Best Single Malt at the World Whiskies Awards 2021. Walker opts for long fermentation times—160 hours on average, as opposed to the usual 40 or 50—to allow for flavor compounds to be as bold as possible. The distillery offers a variety of tours, as well as tasting-only experiences at its new Whisky Bar & Tasting Lounge. the glenallachie.com

Established in 1892, The Balvenie is home to a sprawling stone campus that produces one of the world's fastest-growing single-malt brands. On the tour, guests learn about the Five Rare Crafts—using homegrown barley, doing floor maltings, and more—that the distillery has employed since its long-ago founding. thebalvenie.com

Glenfiddich is one of the oldest family-owned distilleries in Scotland, as William Grant and his nine children built it with their bare hands in 1886-87. In 1963, Glenfiddich helped introduce single malt—until then a well-kept Scottish secret—to the world, and it remains the biggest, most acclaimed brand on the planet. On the Solera Deconstructed tour, visitors prepare their own version of Glenfiddich 15 Year Old by combining whiskies from different cask samples. glenfiddich.com



"There's a hardiness and ingenuity to much of our craft traditions here."

"There aren't many proper old-school pubs in Edinburgh any longer," Jamieson says, adding that the ones that do exist can be "a wee bit scary." Happily, there's nothing frightening about Nauticus, though it is traditional, with red-and-green leather seats and an upright piano under bookshelves stuffed with vintage tomes. Even better, 90 percent of its products are Scottish or have Scottish links. The Porridge Colada Milk Punch Matt orders is made with Aberfeldy whisky, coconut cream and yogurt, pineapple, lemon, oat syrup, and tea; he proclaims it much tastier than his usual morning muesli.

Dinner tonight is in the central Edinburgh area of

Stockbridge. We're dining at buzzy Skua, run by Tomás Gormley, who last year became one of the youngest chefs in Scotland ever to receive a Michelin star while at his previous restaurant, Heron. A quick cab ride brings us to a red neon sign that points to a jet-black basement lit with flickering candles. The food is as bold as the space: My squid-ink crumpet stuffed with smoked lobster is briny, buttery, and brilliant, and a simple dish of foraged maitake mushrooms cooked with walnuts and lovage bursts with earthy flavors. Matt's partridge with creamy bread sauce gets a sweet-tart punch from red currant. Dessert is Valrhona Dulcey chocolate mousse with spiced apple and pickled ginger, which is a bit sour for my liking; Matt couldn't be more delighted that he doesn't have to share.

Our original plan had been to get a nightcap back at The Balmoral, but we decide discretion is the better part of valor and turn in early. Tomorrow we're off to explore the Highlands.

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A pony-led picnic, a castle visit, and the ultimate fish and chips in the Highlands

It's a clear day, and the two-hour drive is mesmeric, winding roads flanked by brooding hills dotted with grazing sheep. I'm struck by how bare the terrain becomes the farther north we progress. The hills are bereft of trees, courtesy of harvesting and farming that reduced Scotland's forest cover to a mere 5 percent in the early 20th century. The Forestry Act of 1919 was passed as an attempt at rewilding, slowly bringing trees back to the Highlands, but the landscape's rawness still has an otherworldly quality. I pass the drive in a state of awe, snapping photos through the window.

Finally, we reach Braemar, a sleepy village set in the heart of Cairngorms National Park, where we check in at **The Fife Arms**, a 19th-century coaching inn built after the royal purchase

of nearby Balmoral Castle in 1852 turned the neighboring villages into tourist hubs. In 2015, the powerhouse gallerists behind Hauser & Wirth bought the inn and transformed it into a design hotel, complete with an eccentric mélange of floral wallpapers, taxidermy, a carved chimneypiece inspired by the works of Robert Burns, and artworks by Pablo Picasso and Louise Bourgeois.

We warily eye the gathering clouds—not a good sign for our next activity, a hike to Queen Victoria's

e wake up just as the sun is rising, ready to hit the road in our rental car—that is, after a full Scottish breakfast for Matt and corned beef hash with a poached egg for me at The Balmoral.



Arms hotel

From top: Balmoral

home; the John Brown

Castle, said to be

Room at The Fife

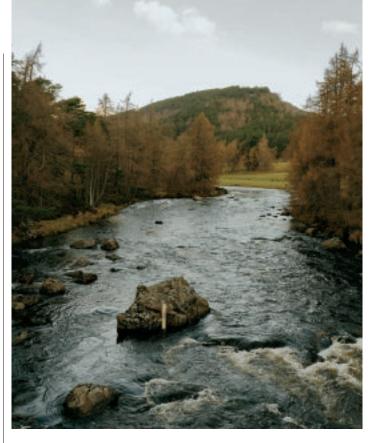
the late Queen Elizabeth II's favorite





favorite picnic spot. Luckily, the hotel provides wellies and raincoats, and soon enough we're mucking it up in nature alongside Jonny Stage of Sandgrouse Travel & Expeditions. Stage, who leads high-end excursions around Scotland, looks like a modern-day ghillie with his camouflage jacket, deerstalker cap, and walking stick. His associate, Stewart Miller, acts as our "pony man" and handles Brae, a gorgeous 15-year-old native Highland pony loaded with 100-yearold grouse panniers that hold our lunch. Stage says that in times past, one of the pony man's responsibilities was to collect the quarry at the end of a hunt; the hunters would signal their location by burning heather.

The rain is coming down hard, and although I'm cold and wet, I marvel at the stark mountains and undulating valleys, all covered in a fine mist, as we ascend the hill. It's too slippery to make it to Victoria's preferred picnic spot, so we find shelter under an ancient Scotch pine tree. We settle onto tartan





Clockwise from above left: a river in Cairngorms National Park; scallops at Fish Shop; a replica of Queen Victoria's private rail car, in Ballater

blankets and feast on egg sandwiches and coffee while Stage regales us with stories about his adventures with clients. One of his most popular requests is to set up meetings for Scottish-Americans with the chief of their family's clan. "It helps people feel their history," he says. "Genealogy is very important with Americans."

The skies have cleared by the time we make our way back to the hotel to freshen up. Soon, we're driving toward **Balmoral Castle**. Prince Albert bought the 19th-century palace for Queen Victoria, who called it her "dear paradise in the Highlands." It's also said that



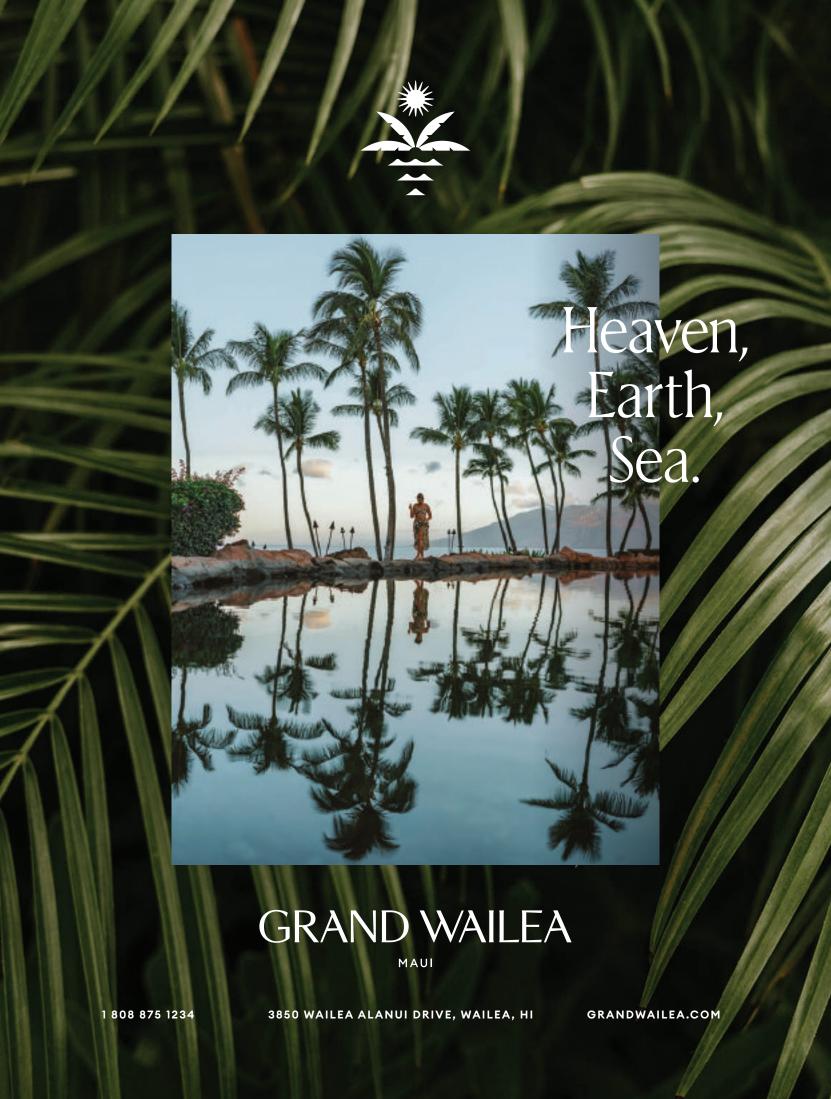
"Even with tourists around, the sense of peace is allencompassing."

it was Queen Elizabeth II's favorite home. (She passed away here in 2022.) We walk up a tree-lined path that opens onto the massive, Gothic Revival building. The grounds are open to the public when the royals aren't in residence, so we meander across manicured lawns and then wander behind the royal abode onto a leaf-strewn path along the River Dee. Even with tourists around, the sense of peace is all-encompassing. At the gift shop, overpriced Balmoral-stamped teacups and imitation royal jewelry jolt me back to reality.

We jump in the car again, and 15 minutes later we're marveling at the chocolate-box village of Ballater. Craggy mountains tower behind quaint storefronts, including **Dee Valley Confectioners**, which makes old-fashioned sweets like brandy balls and soor plooms.

Next door, replicas of Queen Victoria's private rail car and waiting room are housed in a former train station. After a devastating fire in 2015, the station was authentically recreated with help from then-Prince Charles, in an attempt to attract tourism. The king's influence is everywhere in Ballater: He was also the brains behind the Rothesay Rooms, a lovely, turn-of-the-century-style café. While perusing Scottish artists at Ballater Gallery, we learn that owner David Reid opened the showroom in 2019, upon noticing the positive changes the royal had brought to the town.

For dinner, we head to Fish **Shop**. Head chef Marcus Sherry and his wife, general manager Jasmine, helm an inviting space decorated with fishermen's portraits and yellow nets. As a fervent fan of fish and chips, I try the restaurant's elevated version: crumbed Shetland pollock with tartar sauce and herb salad. It's light, fresh, and flavorful—the best fish and chips I've had in recent memory. Matt orders the Macduff lobster, with homemade tagliarini that's









From left: Marcus and Jasmine Sherry at Fish Shop; Pablo Picasso's Femme Assise dans un Fauteuil hangs on a tartan wall at The Fife Arms covered in swirls of a chili, garlic, and chervil sauce. At his exhortations, I take a bite: It's spicy and buttery, hearty and herbaceous, and, Jasmine shares, the restaurant's most popular dish. We declare this the best meal of the trip.

Back at The Fife Arms, we have a whisky tasting at **Bertie's Bar**, which is named for Queen Victoria's playboy son and is fittingly opulent: red velvet seats, Persian rugs, crystal chandeliers. Bar manager Mark Shedden

"A glittering wall of whiskies is divided by flavors: fragrant, fruity, rich, and smoky."

leads us around a glittering wall of whiskies, 85 percent of which are Scottish, divided by flavors: fragrant, fruity, rich, and smoky. After deciphering our taste profiles, he chooses a Tomintoul 17-year-old for me (tastes of roasted hazelnuts) and a smoky Glenturret 7-year-old for Matt. "It's a campfire in your mouth" Matt says.

To clear our heads, we take a late-night stroll through Braemar. We're hoping to do some stargazing, since Cairngorms is a Dark Sky Park, making it one of the world's best places to see the constellations and the aurora borealis. The moon is almost full and surprisingly visible, but, alas, clouds obscure the rest of the heavens. I'm sad we won't end tonight under a blanket of stars, but a glance back at the hotel cheers me up: I spy a buzzing bar, a blazing fire, and a vacant sofa across from the Picasso. Matt takes my hand, and we head back inside.

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WHERE TO STAY

Kimpton Charlotte Square Hotel

Comprising seven interconnected Georgian townhouses, this stylish hotel boasts 199 rooms and suites, with hipster-approved decor ranging from wildlife prints to clawfoot bathtubs. Everything is made in-house at the restaurant, Aizle, from the hand-churned butter to the kombucha in the cocktails. The spa uses Ishga products made in the Outer Hebrides and has the U.K.'s first Sound Wellness Room. From \$314, kimptoncharlottesquare.com

The Balmoral

The grande dame of Edinburgh hotels has hosted Paul McCartney and J.K. Rowling, who finished writing the Harry Potter series here. The 187 rooms and suites have Scottish tartan sofas and sylvan wallpaper, and the Michelinrecommended Number One restaurant highlights Scottish ingredients. Afternoon tea at the glass-domed Palm Court is a must, as is a tipple at Scotch, with its selection of more than 500 whiskies. From \$333, roccofortehotels.com

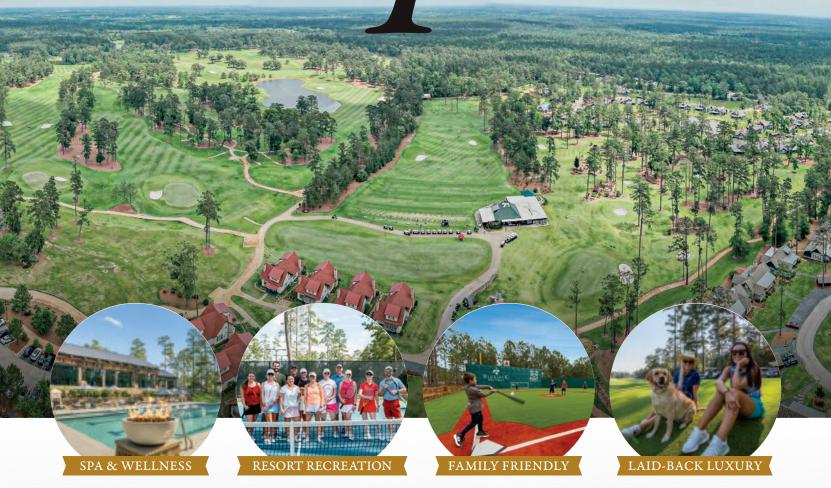
The Fife Arms

Located in the village of Braemar, this 19th-century inn was given a makeover by Hauser & Wirth gallerists Manuela and Iwan Wirth in 2015. The 46 rooms and suites are individually decorated with oriental rugs, William Morris archival wallpapers, and plenty of tartan. The Clunie Dining Room excels at Scottish fine dining, while The Flying Stag offers hearty pub fare. Experiences—fishing, foraging, designing your own tartan-are extra, but worth it. From \$581, thefifearms.com



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