

An artful restoration

The Fife Arms, a sleepy Scottish Highlands coaching inn, has been refurbished, rejuvenated and packed with witty paraphernalia and local references

It's official: 'maximalism' – a reaction against uncluttered, less-is-more sparsity – is a 'thing' in British hospitality. And if you're not convinced, a visit to this former coaching inn, the focal point of the small village of Braemar – just a few minutes from the Queen's residence at Balmoral in the Cairngorms National Park – will surely sway you.

A solid granite Victorian building, originally built as a hunting lodge by the Duke of Fife, The Fife Arms was purchased in late 2014 by Swiss husband-and-wife art dealers Iwan and Manuela Wirth. When it came to breathing new life into a building that had fallen into disrepair over several decades, they decided to wed the Scottish Highlands surrounds – its heritage, local craftsmanship, landscape, wildlife and history – to their refined tastes in contemporary art. Since then, with no little architectural input from Ben Addy of Moxon Architects (who grew up in Aberdeenshire), they've created a 46-room jewel in Scotland's hospitality crown in which blank space is anathema. The effect is chaotic, a little anarchic – and utterly enchanting.



Photo: Sim Canetty-Clark



Anyone who considers themselves a serious aesthete should probably set aside three or four hours for their first recce. Enter the lobby and, just by reception, there's an 1874 watercolour done by Queen Victoria (who made this region Britain's most fashionable at one point) in 1874, depicting the head of a stag shot by her servant-turned-friend John Brown. Glance in the other direction and your attention is hiked upwards towards a specially commissioned chandelier, made up of intertwined, multi-coloured glass antlers, by American contemporary artist Richard Jackson (artists represented by the Wirths naturally feature prominently here).

This is just a taste of all the eclectic whimsy to come. Stroll further into the sofa-strewn reception area, past a Steinway grand piano that's been given a bleach treatment by Los Angeles artist Mark Bradford, and you'll find an elaborately carved fireplace, salvaged from the now demolished Montrave House in Fife, which depicts scenes from Robbie Burns' poems (see above, right).

Proceeding through the rooms involves assault after assault on the visitor's curiosity. Here, you'll encounter a piece by one of Queen Victoria's favourite painters, Archibald Thorburn; there, one of Pablo Picasso's many musketeer paintings. Elsewhere you'll find a ceiling, inspired by locally mined crystals that reveal concentric circles when cut open, by Chinese artist Zhang Enli; open another door and you'll be struck by a chandelier by Subodh Gupta depicting traditional Indian kitchen utensils with multi-coloured bulbs.

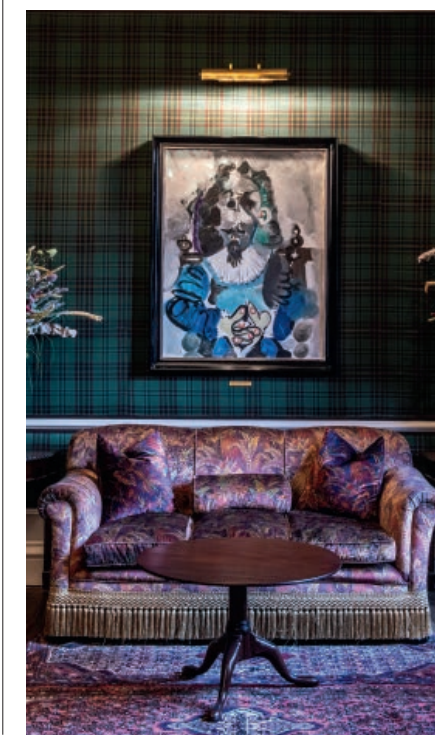
And there's more to this repository of intrigue than just curated artworks: special tartan and the tweed patterns have been commissioned from Scottish fabric maker Araminta Campbell; 'curiosity cabinets' have been filled with dinosaur vertebrae, mammoth tusks and stuffed animals – including one Dr Frankenstein-esque hybrid with small horns, ducks' feet, an owl's body and a bushy tail ("we tell Americans it's a haggis," jokes our guide).

(opposite) The facade stays true to its coaching inn past; (clockwise) a stately room; owners Iwan and Manuela Wirth; an original Picasso, Mousquetaire assis



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– Russell Sage, interior designer



The entire building is stuffed, so to speak, with taxidermy: native animals, of course, the Wirths' main priority being that everything found within these walls must pack some kind of locally inspired narrative (even the rooms' key fobs adhere to this – one, marked 'Geology', is a cast of a freshwater mussel shell, an endangered species native to Scotland).

"When we started working with Iwan and Manuela, they were very clear – nothing that came into the hotel should just be decorative," explains interior designer Russell Sage, who helmed the restoration project. "It was very important to them that guests could immerse themselves in the rich history and culture of Braemar and the Scottish Highlands. Over the last three years, we collected 16,000 antiques, artwork, furnishings and objects, and each piece has been chosen to help tell a story – whether that be about the Jacobite Risings, Robert Louis Stevenson or the local flora and fauna." – NICK SCOTT

The Fife Arms, +44 0 1339 720 200, thefifearms.com. Suites cost £795 including breakfast.