

Escape CANDACRAIG

This majestic home in the Highlands has had its share of glitzy guests – now you can count yourself among them by hiring it out

Photography ZAC and ZAC Words Natasha Radmehr

By the time we reach Glenshee's snow-dusted peaks, our final destination of Strathdon within tantalising reach, I have bragged to half my phone book about where we're going. "I'm staying in Billy Connolly's former holiday home this weekend," I gloat, adding a castle emoji to really rub it in. "Robin Williams and Steve Martin once stayed there, you know!"

Yes, Candacraig has a storied history: hundreds of years of it, in fact. Since the 17th century, this Baronial mansion has passed from landed gentry to environmental activists (Anita Roddick, founder of The Body Shop, once lived here) to national treasures and, most recently, to enterprising couple Lynne and Marc Lino, who have sensitively renovated the 12-bedroom home. Over the years Candacraig has welcomed royals and rock stars through its doors – Ewan McGregor even carved his name into one of the window sills. Now you too can become part of its story by renting it in its entirety for a private celebration or short break.

Our story begins on the tree-lined driveway. The house reveals itself in filmic fashion, its pepperpot turrets peering out above centuries-old sequoias. It's a spellbinding place, nestled deep in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. Hire includes not just the run of the house but its 18-acre grounds, where we spot a lochan in a woodland clearing and a Victorian walled garden planted with fruit trees and wildflowers. The estate even has its own chapel (though weddings are off the table); I half-expect a horse-drawn carriage to materialise from the frozen mists beyond. ►

[Opposite] Candacraig might be luxurious, but not at the expense of sustainability. The house has been awarded a Butterfly Mark by Positive Luxury for its environmentally friendly practices, which include rewilding the landscape, heating with a woodburning biomass system and banning fishing and machinery from the lochan, which serves as a carbon sink





[Above] Lynne Lino worked with interior designer Fiona MacLeod Cameron of Studio Highlands to update the drawing room (above) and whisky library (right) while still retaining their magnificent period features. Billy's old sofa, pictured here, was recovered in Designers Guild's Drysdale fabric, an elegant bouclé weave. The patterned cushions are Saint Paul by Elitis and harmonise with the landscape, as do two blue Heronsford sofas by William Yeoward, out of shot. Many of the furnishings are antique pieces, but the wall-mounted round shields are reproductions

I paint a lavish picture, but this is no buttoned-up country manor. Sure, it's fancy, but the Linos want their guests to relax and have a good time. Their team facilitate that by arranging bespoke experiences, which can include anything from falconry and hiking to Land Rover safaris and barbecues by the lochan. Anything goes.

As we're visiting in January, our itinerary is of the coorie-indoors variety. Afternoon tea is served by the log fire in the warm embrace of the wood-panelled drawing room. It's cosy but grand, with a carved stone fireplace and exquisite ornamental plaster ceiling. Next door in the whisky library we curl up on a moss-green velvet sofa for a professional whisky tasting, sampling drams from the bottles lining the shelves. Under the guidance of local expert Gordon Muir, we learn how to discern different notes: aniseed, apples, bales of hay.

Old photos show the house dressed in red, but Lynne Lino has introduced a more retina-soothing palette of blues and greens ►





to reflect the surrounding nature. It's a smart move. For all its antiques, Persian rugs and gilt-framed portraits, the house feels bright and homely rather than haughty. The bedrooms are individually styled; some freshly refurbished, others furnished with textiles and curios selected by Candacraig's predecessors. The Linos have been careful to preserve what they can – they're big on sustainability – but the bathrooms have all been redone to luxury-hotel standard, complete with Aesop toiletries (heaven).

Remaining gloriously, defiantly untouched is the dining room, which we are piped into for a Burns banquet prepared by chef Mark Heirs (formerly of Heston Blumenthal's The Fat Duck). Green tartan fabric lines the walls and drapes across the chandelier-strung ceiling; flickering candles march along the long table, which is encircled by red tartan chairs. It is bonkers and brilliant. Reminds me of someone, actually...

Afterwards, we retire to the drawing room where we're joined by folk musicians Jonny Hardie and Pete MacCallum, no strangers to entertaining at Candacraig. Underscored by the gentle crackle of the fire, they fiddle and strum, deftly weaving between toe-tapping trad classics, wistful ballads and comedy verse. We laugh, we cry, we make new friends. Celebrity lore might have brought us here, but it's for memories like these that we'll return. ■

Candacraig sleeps 20. From £10,000 per night. candacraig.com

[Above and right] The airy bedrooms marry traditional style with modern comforts: brand new bathrooms and pleasingly plump beds

