



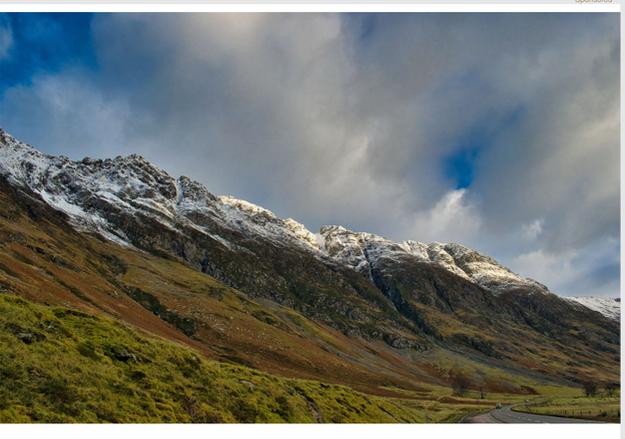
Exploring The Cairngorms In The Scottish Highlands

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PHOTOS: Michele Koh Morozillo, Unsplash, Jack Skimmer, Steve Douglas

"King you-seer" said the gentleman at Edinburgh's Waverley train station's ticketing booth, politely correcting me when I asked to purchase a ticket to Kingussie — which I had mispronounced as "long goosey". Gaelic for "head of the pine forest", Kingussie is a small town in the Scottish Highlands and would be my base for exploring the stunning Cairngorms National Park over the next few days. Its unusual name — like many things in this part of Scotland — seem to hint at the ancient and mystical.

As the train moved north, I could see the landscape morphing through the carriage window — gently rolling hills and farmlands gave way to dense pine forests and towering snow-capped peaks. Scenes from *Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* came to mind as the low-lying terrain of the southern part of the country was slowly supplanted by the wild and rugged terrain of the north.

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Bigger than the whole of Luxembourg, the Cairngorms is the largest national park in Britain. It includes 4,520sq km of primeval Caledonian pine forests, woodlands, heags, tundras like plateaus, heath-dotted glens, rivers, lakes, waterfalls, and a mountain range with five of the highest peaks in the United Kingdom: Ben Macdui, Braeriach, Cairn Toul, Sporr na Lochain Uaine, and Cairn Gorm. Its forests and glens are home to a variety of rare plants, such as the twitflower and wascap fungi, as well as wildlife such as the Scottish wildcat, the crested tit, the red fox, the red deer, the mountain hare, the capercaillie, and the pine marten.

Scattered across the Cairngorms are numerous small towns and villages, the most well-known of which are Aviemore and Braemar. I chose to stay at lesser-known Kingussie because I was lucky enough to secure myself a reservation at the exclusive Killehenny Farmhouse & Cottages — a 1850 farmhouse that was renovated and transformed into a luxury boutique hotel by Danish fashion tycoon Anders Holch Povlsen and his wife Anne in 2015. The property includes four guestrooms in the main house and a separate two-level standalone cottage — The Hayloft, where I would be staying — which is just a five-minute walk from the main farmhouse.



At the Farmhouse's communal dining room, I fuelled up on a breakfast of homemade granola, fruit compote, sausages, eggs, and locally sourced mushrooms, and chatted with the cook over freshly brewed coffee. She handed me a sandwich, an apple, and a flapjack, all prettily wrapped in brown paper and secured with string. I stashed the items of my picnic lunch into my backpack and headed outdoors.



Following a path at the back of the Farmhouse that meandered alongside the River Tromie, I passed a tranquil lake before entering forests where I hiked for miles without seeing a single soul. I listened to birdsong and savoured the cool, crisp air and sunshine as I walked eastwards through woods and meadows till I arrived at Bellefish, the site of an old Highland steading nestled within a picturesque glen surrounded by snow-covered mountains. Here stood an old stone botchy — a traditional Scottish hut built for crofters, where hikers can now spend the night free of charge — so I stepped inside and tried to imagine what a typical day might look like for the crofters who had inhabited these glens centuries ago.

On my second day, I took a leisurely walk to the nearby Rutherford Barracks, one of the best-preserved British barracks built after the Jacobite uprising. This was followed by a visit to Speyside Distillery to sample some whiskey. The next morning, a four-wheel drive took me to Rothenburgh Estate — a private estate and nature reserve in the town of Aviemore with many outdoor activities, walking and cycling paths, as well as a farm shop, a café, and a deli. Guided by an estate ranger, I explored the estate on a quad bike and saw red deer and hairy coos — a breed of long-horned, shaggy-coated rustic cattle that are indigenous to the Scottish Highlands and Outer Hebrides.



My final day was spent in the village of Balmoral, where I toured the grounds, gardens, and ballroom of Balmoral Castle. It has been the Scottish holiday home of the British Royal Family since 1852, and is one of the finest examples of Scottish Baroque architecture. After exploring Balmoral, I took myself to The Fife Arms for lunch at the hotel's public bar, The Flying Stag.

Named The Sunday Times Hotel of the Year 2019, The Fife Arms is a historical landmark that was revamped by its new owners, Manuela and Iwan Wirth — the owners of renowned international art gallery Hauser & Wirth — with a display of outstanding antiques and specially commissioned artworks by contemporary artists such as Shara Noor, Guillermo Kuitca, and Zhang Enli. The interior of the Flying Stag is adorned with the works of American artist James Prosek, who is known for his unique paintings of hybrid animals. On my way back, I stopped at the Highland Folk Museum in Newtonmore, where I got the chance to learn about what life was like for the Highland communities who lived in and around the Cairngorms from 1700s to the 1950s.



On each night of my stay, I enjoyed convivial dinners with the other guests — there were never more than 10 of us — in the communal dining room. Over beautifully plated three-course meals made with locally sourced ingredients, and wines, coffees, and teas that were thoughtfully selected by the hotel's staff, we swapped travel tales and marvelled over all the magnificent things we'd seen on our daily adventures in the Cairngorms.

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