

# This penthouse with superb views is the height of luxury

Cheval Edinburgh Grand's top suite has three bedrooms, a kitchen island and the city's most impressive terrace, says Scottish Press awards travel writer of the year **Gabriella Bennett**

**S**unrise on Arthur's Seat looks different from the seventh floor. Mist cloaks the extinct volcano, muddying the riddle of grooves on Salisbury Crags into a sepia silhouette. To the right, at eye level, looms the gothic tower of the Balmoral Hotel.

Since 1902 its moon-faced clock has run slow, unlike the pin-sized joggers I can see haring across the summit of the seat.

Here, from the terrace of what must be Edinburgh's best-located penthouse, the Scottish capital reveals its secrets. Looking down on to the grey patchwork city I spy sights usually reserved for birds: pepperpot chimneys, fish-scale roof slates and a huge glass cupola studded with star-shaped windows.

Home for the weekend is the Cheval Edinburgh Grand, a collection of 50 chichi apartments set within the handsome former Bank of Scotland headquarters on St Andrew Square. Bought in 2014 by the property developer Chris Stewart, the building underwent a four-year restoration project focusing on retaining relics from its old life. These days the cavellike basement gym features original fittings from the bank's enormous safe, while the smooth white curves of the restored spiral staircase could give the Guggenheim a run for its money.

Our digs, the three-bedroom, three-bathroom penthouse, is the crowning glory. The fact it sleeps six takes the sting out of the price, since a night at full occupancy will cost each guest £325. Unlike the rest of the Grand, which dates from the Thirties, it forms part of a recent extension. Compared with, say, the fourth floor's director's suite, with its ornate Arts and Crafts plasterwork, it lacks nostalgic charm, but Stewart and his team have countered this with the addition of dark wood panelling in the entrance hall. Teal velvet armchairs and a gas fire in the living room lend warmth and softness, as does the circular dining table and art deco-style pendant lights.

However, the moneymaker is the most magnificent balcony in the city. Accessed from the living room and two of the bedrooms via a glazed wall, it is 31 sq m of minimalist glass magic, angular as a supermodel's jawline. This is where I spend most of my visit, flopped on the squiggly outdoors settee after padding through from my morning bath in the master suite.

Directly opposite, in the capacious kitchen, a private chef would be right at home, with a faux marble-topped island and a foreverness of cupboards and crockery. Sadly my partner and I have to slum it by making our own hot drinks to take through to the alfresco dining area. Why extend to DIY breakfast, we think, when we're in the epicentre of new gastro Edinburgh? The Grand's neighbours include the astonishingly popular Dishoom, so off we go for its famous bacon naan (£6.90; breakfast dishes from £3.70, dishoom.com). Foodies should also keep an eye out for



Clockwise from top: the penthouse kitchen and living room opens on to the terrace; the suite's master bedroom; the spiral staircase

Gordon Ramsay's Bread Street Kitchen (coming next month) and the Ivy (mains from £14.75, theyyedinburgh.com), while lazier diners must try Hawksmoor, the upmarket steakhouse (mains from £15.50; thehawksmoor.com) tucked into the old banking hall on the ground floor.

The Grand's own bar and dining space, the Register Club, was shut during our trip (blame Covid) and to be honest its closure came as a blessing. We felt guilty for not once using our kitchen, but there are just so many eating-out options near by. It was too easy to shuffle in through the grand reception with its plush crimson seats and take the lift to the

top storey before collapsing on the huge bed after a meal on the square. There is a second lift exclusive to the penthouse, designed to give high-profile guests privacy from hoi polloi.

Other quibbles can be filed under "first world problems". I'd have liked to see a few paintings enliven the apartment's walls, although a picture window capturing the golden dog poo of the St James Quarter caused me to stop and question its existence every time I passed it, which is the true definition of art. The lack of room service also felt like a missed trick, but as the general manager pointed out

when I requested late-night tonic water on the Cheval app, a Sainsbury's is within staggering distance.

In any case, have you ever been hungover in the clouds? I'd highly recommend it. A breeze sweeps in from the North Sea, cooling my coffee to the desired temperature. Seagulls keening against the peal of a police siren sounds like an urban harmony written just for here. Nothing for it but to close my eyes and hope check-out doesn't apply to me.

Gabriella Bennett was a guest of the Cheval Edinburgh Grand, where a night in the penthouse costs from £1,950

## Logie Steading, near Forres

By pleasant woodland and brilliant picnic spots, with a lovely garden around the big house near by, this is much better than your usual crafty courtyard. It includes Giles Pearson's country furniture business, a second-hand bookshop and the Olive Tree Café, a home-baking tearoom with integrity. This seems fitting — the estate was built with the fortune of the guy who invented the digestive biscuit.

## Johnstons cashmere, Elgin

Johnstons is, as they say, one of the last of the Mohicans making textiles in Scotland. It is apparently "the only British mill to transform fibre to garment" (yarns are spun at its factory in Elgin and made into clothes in the Borders). This extensive mill shop — which stocks its own couture cashmere — the high-quality, classy "home" section, heritage centre and café are a serious visitor attraction.

## Crail Pottery, Crail

Find this spot at the foot of Rose Wynd, signposted from the main street (best to walk). In a tree-shaded courtyard and attic, a cornucopia of brilliant and useful things, created by the prolifically talented Grieve family since 1965. A huge variety of useful and beautiful ceramics still made downstairs. This is the East Neuk memento. Don't miss the harbour near by, one of the Neuk's most romantic neuks.

## Harestanes countryside centre, near Jedburgh

Farmstead complex on the Monteviot Estate with café, exhibition and superior crafts, including Buy Design's beautiful furniture, ceramics and glass. Also find Mary's Dairy ice cream. Check website for opening times. There is an event programme and walks — go through the door in the wall to the Teviot walks and St Cuthbert's Way.

## Balnakeil, Durness

Founded in the 1960s in what one imagines was a haze of hash, this craft village is still home to downshifts and creatives — that is, talented people. Paintings, pottery, glass, wood and jewellery in huts where the community work and hang out. Cocoa Mountain makes here the heavenly thin chocolate you get all over the north. **Taken from Scotland the Best by Peter Irvine (£15.99, HarperCollins)**

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LAURA A. TILMAN PHOTOGRAPHY

The contemporary treehouse was inspired by Passivhaus principles. Below: Natasha enjoys a brew with a view

# A serene lochside treehouse from your wildest dreams

This minimalist cabin opens to the natural wonder of the Highlands, finds **Natasha Radmehr**

**'A**lexa, play *The Bare Necessities*." The treehouse fills with the sound of a peppy brass band and we start shuffling like Baloo, my best friend Laura and I, a curtain of leaves tickling the window behind us.

We haven't had to venture as far as an Indian jungle to forget about our worries and strife (although it has been so long since I went on holiday that anywhere but Glasgow feels as far-flung as Madhya Pradesh). It only took a few hours' drive up north through heather-blanketed hills for our cares to dissolve. A turn 15 minutes before Ullapool led us along a single-track road to Letters, a painterly smudge of a village where the Highlands Treehouse presides over gleaming Loch Broom.

I say treehouse, but it's more an elegant cabin on stilts than a refuge for Ewoks. Run by husband and wife Michael Mailer and Anne-Marie Quinn, this is the newest of two holiday rentals high in the four-acre woodlands behind the couple's home, Taigh a Chnuic, or house on the hill.

I've dressed impractically and clomp up more than 70 steps in heeled sandals to reach our sanctuary between the boughs, panting like an asthmatic spaniel. When I learn that the treehouse arrived by helicopter, I feel a stab of envy. No wonder it looks so serene.

The design seems familiar. I later find out that Michael, a project designer, and Anne-Marie, an artist, worked with the eco-architecture practice Echo Living, inspired by the principles of Passivhaus living. Echo Living is helmed by the multidisciplinary designer Sam Booth, whose sustainable, contemporary creations have appeared on *Grand Designs* more than once.

Scandi-influenced with a charcoal-painted larch exterior and blond Italian cross-ply interior, every detail of the open-plan treehouse has been considered. For a small space it packs in a lot: there's a king-size bed, fully fitted kitchen, balcony, wood-burning stove, dining table and a window seat that folds out into a single bed. "You'd have to be really close to someone to stay with them here," Laura says, looking pointedly at my Mickey Mouse pants.

Having only opened in April, and with a strict shoes-off policy, everything is immaculate — and, thank goodness, resolutely on-grid. Underfloor heating, wi-fi and a hotel-standard loo and shower mean we are very much living in comfort, right down to a jar of Anne-Marie's home-baked pasticcini di mandorle and a box of eggs from the couple's hens. "This is better than watching TV."

I say, scarfing the almond biscuits while Laura coaxes a fire into ignition. We've just been for an evening stroll along the banks of the loch, stopping every five minutes to admire the wildflowers hiding between towering ferns and Beinn Dearg, bathing in the golden syrup of the sun. A few cyclists wheeled past and we would have joined them — treehouse guests receive complimentary use of two bikes — but we wanted to take it slow and perhaps catch sight of the dolphins often spotted looping the waters.

We don't see any ourselves, but our luck changes the next day 15 minutes up the road in Ullapool, where we go on a two-hour boat trip around the Summer Isles with Shearwater Cruises (£35pp; summerqueen.co.uk).

Noel, our guide, paints a vivid picture of the lore and legends of this largely uninhabited archipelago, weaving in stories about the wildlife and conservation projects as we sail along the Coigach peninsula and into the pitch-black yawn of Cathedral Cave.

We pass chubby harbour seals blobbed on the rocks. Gannets swoop then drop like darts into the inky water. The resident white-tailed eagles hide from us, but then the surface of the loch puckers and it's clear something else is coming to stay hello. We peer over the edge and watch in wonder as a silken pod of dolphins dances before us. My tears catch me by surprise.

Afterwards we make a pilgrimage to the nearby Seafood Shack (mains about £9; seafoodshack.co.uk). Everyone raves about it, and rightly so: it's proper boat-to-plate grub, with a menu that changes daily depending on what the local fishermen have landed. We eat oysters heaped with creamy mackerel pâté; smoked trout spiked with zesty red slaw; a reviving cullen skink. It's so good we come back the next day.

On our second and final night we look through the treehouse skylights at the stars twinkling beyond the branches. It feels as though we've been away for much longer. And for all the luxuries that come with staying at the Highlands Treehouse, it's the bare necessities that have proved most restorative: the obscenely beautiful landscape, the wildlife, the company. Maybe that cartoon bear had a point.



Natasha Radmehr

## Need to know

Natasha Radmehr was a guest of Highlands Treehouse (kip hideaways.com), which sleeps up to three people. A minimum three-night stay costs from £600