



Clockwise from left: The Prince Albert suite; a kilt-sporting porter outside the hotel's entrance; the surrounding Grampian mountains; Lucian Freud's portrait of his daughter Annie hangs in the hotel lobby; the shop is stocked with locally made wool blankets; Louise Bourgeois' Maman spider statue in the hotel's timber courtyard



HOSPITALITY / UK

## OPEN ARMS

In a remote part of Scotland known for hosting the Highland Games, Swiss gallerists Iwan and Manuela Wirth have opened a spectacular and welcoming hideaway with a stunning art collection and vital connection to the country's wilderness.

WRITER Hester Underhill PHOTOGRAPHER Robert Ormerod

The road from Aberdeen to the small village of Braemar runs through the Scottish Highlands, deep into the heart of the Cairngorms national park. It winds through the craggy, heather-covered Grampian mountains and past Balmoral Castle. When Queen Victoria acquired Balmoral in 1854, tourism in the area swelled rapidly and new constructions sprung up to cater for the influx of visitors. One of them was a coaching inn built by the Earl of Fife in 1856. Four years ago, Swiss gallerists Iwan and Manuela Wirth bought the inn to house their first hotel, The Fife Arms.

The building is high Victorian: its pink and grey granite exterior features tall gables adorned with dark red timber bargeboards lit to give the hotel a beacon-like quality amid the mountains. Local architect Ben Addy carefully restored the building, which mainly hosted coach parties heading north to Inverness before the Wirths bought it. "This was a complete transformation in every sense," says Addy, who demolished the concrete extensions from the 1980s and worked for three years to put right what had been done to the building over the past few decades. Central to Addy's restoration was the involvement of the local community: he employed joiners, blacksmiths, carpenters, stonemasons and more from Braemar and surrounds to work on the project. "Instead of having one big contract we've had about 45 separate ones," says Addy. "This meant we were able to handpick people from the area to help. It's a better product thanks to that and more connected to the community."

The hotel is keen to maintain that connection to the community: specially commissioned portraits of some of Braemar's 450 residents line the walls of The Flying Stag (a pub that is part of the hotel); schoolchildren placed a time capsule within the pub's bar; villagers have come out of retirement to work at the hotel; and Braemar's knitting circle made an array of red squirrels to decorate the family room. "Iwan and Manuela have known since day one that it wouldn't work unless the village was on board," says Russell Sage, who designed the hotel's interior. "We've managed to hire at least half of the village at some point or another."

Sage and his team spent much of the past three years visiting auction houses across the country collecting more than 12,000 pieces of art and antique furnishings, which have been placed meticulously throughout the hotel. Every turn reveals something new and eccentric: marble busts, a cabinet of taxidermied birds or a 3 metre-tall carved mahogany and pine chimneypiece illustrating some of Scottish poet Robert Burns' works.

"Iwan and Manuela love colour and they love history," says Sage. "We always had this joke about 'international beige' as an overly safe hotel language; this is like a joyful explosion. The hotel is so full of stories and we've had two researchers working for about two years on the project to authenticate every detail."

Each of the hotel's 46 rooms is a homage to life in the Highlands. The Queen Victoria Suite, for instance, is decked in the rich forest green wallpaper of her Balmoral bedroom; The Indian Suite is inspired by Victoria's confidant Abdul Karim and features a handpainted headboard with a design found on a train he took during his journey to Britain. Sage was also keen for the hotel to put its own stamp on Scottish tradition, enlisting Edinburgh-based textile designer Araminta Campbell to create their own tartan and tweed, which is used throughout the hotel for curtains, cushions and blankets in guest rooms, wall cladding in the drawing room and drapes on four-poster beds. But perhaps the most

remarkable feature of The Fife Arms is its art collection. The Wirths, with Ursula Hauser, co-founded nine Hauser & Wirth galleries from Hong Kong to New York and have selected an array of Scottish and international artworks for the hotel. The art on display here rivals any major gallery: the lobby alone features a Richard Jackson chandelier, a Lucian Freud portrait and a stag head rendered in watercolour by Queen Victoria. Elsewhere there are watercolours by Prince Charles, photographs of Elsa Schiaparelli by Man Ray, a sizeable Picasso and one of Louise Bourgeois' Maman spider statues.

If guests can be tempted away from admiring the art, there are plenty of outdoor pursuits to enjoy around the hotel. Braemar lies in the highest and most mountainous parish of the UK and is an ideal spot for stalking, shooting and fishing, all of which can be organised by hotel staff. There is also a library, cocktail bar and newly constructed spa for those seeking a more laid-back holiday. The hotel's Clunie dining room (named after the river it overlooks) celebrates the area's rich culinary traditions by serving refined Scottish dishes made with ingredients from the area; many are roasted over an open flame.

The Flying Stag offers simpler pub dishes, such as fish and chips and haggis, but also contains a remarkable gallery that is open for visitors to explore with a pint of local ale in hand. Here they'll find



ON THE SLOPES / EUROPE

## Think there's snow place like home? Try these boltholes

WRITER Marie-Sophie Schwarzer

### Chalet on the Rocks, Chamonix

"I've been skiing all over the world from Aspen to the Alps. For real skiers, Chamonix is the mecca," says London-based trader Cedric Hanisch, who has just begun to let Chalet on the Rocks, a five-bedroom holiday home in the mountains of the French resort town. Raised in Africa, Hanisch discovered the Alps when he moved to Europe aged 18 but he quickly became a passionate skier with a soft spot for Chamonix. "I fell in love and decided to devote my time to building a chalet that was modern but cosy." In collaboration with Stuttgart-based architect Shakiba Ravazadeh, Hanisch designed a loft-style chalet (think reclaimed wood paired with swathes of glass and concrete) at 1,100m, complete with a wine cellar, sauna and Jacuzzi. It faces Mont Blanc too. "It's a place that you can consider more than a holiday house," says Hanisch. [chaletontherocks.com](http://chaletontherocks.com)



Photographer: Adam Johnston

### The Hide Hotel Flims, Switzerland

This 47-room property established by hotelier Günter Weilguni and designed by Norwegian architect Erik Nissen Johansen of Stylt Trampoli, has just opened in Graubünden in the Swiss Alps. It has access to 235km of pistes and plenty of cosy common spaces for visitors to meet villagers in front of a crackling fire. "It was important for us to create a place where guests and locals come together," says Weilguni. Johansen has introduced lively colours, sumptuous materials and contemporary furnishings to make the property stand out from dime-a-dozen chalets. Dining and drinking stands out as well: the Deli offers regional dishes with an oriental twist, while The Dining specialises in grilled goods. With a bar, boutique cinema, in-house ski- and bike-rental service, ski and snowboard school and children's day-care centre, it's not necessary to leave, unless you're off to the slopes. "You have everything you need right here," says Weilguni. "This landscape can handle something extraordinary." [thehideflims.ch](http://thehideflims.ch)



Photographer: Mark Nolan

glass cabinets filled with taxidermied local wildlife and Highland regalia. The pub is proving to be a focal point for village activity: it has already hosted a Christmas party for Braemar Castle volunteers and a vast St Andrew's day celebration. "It was mad," says general manager Francesca Bertolini. "We had more than 250 local people here. The local choir sang and we ended the night with a fireworks display. It was a very festive occasion."

So far Braemar has been best known for hosting the Highland Games (or the Gathering as the Scots call it), which have been held here since 1832. The games take place every year on the first Saturday of September and bring at least 15,000 visitors to the village to watch competitions such as caber tossing, tug of war and hammer-throwing, while being entertained by the country's finest bagpipe bands and Highland dancers. In spring 2019, a new Highland Games centre, which is funded in part by the Wirths and the Prince Charles Foundation, will open here to showcase the traditions of the event and historic artefacts, such as medals and sporting equipment.

The games might have been bringing tourists to Braemar for the past few hundred years but there's little doubt that the opening of The Fife Arms will encourage visitors to consider the village as a year-round destination. It is sure to draw international attention back to this idyllic corner of the British Isles.

## TRAVEL



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