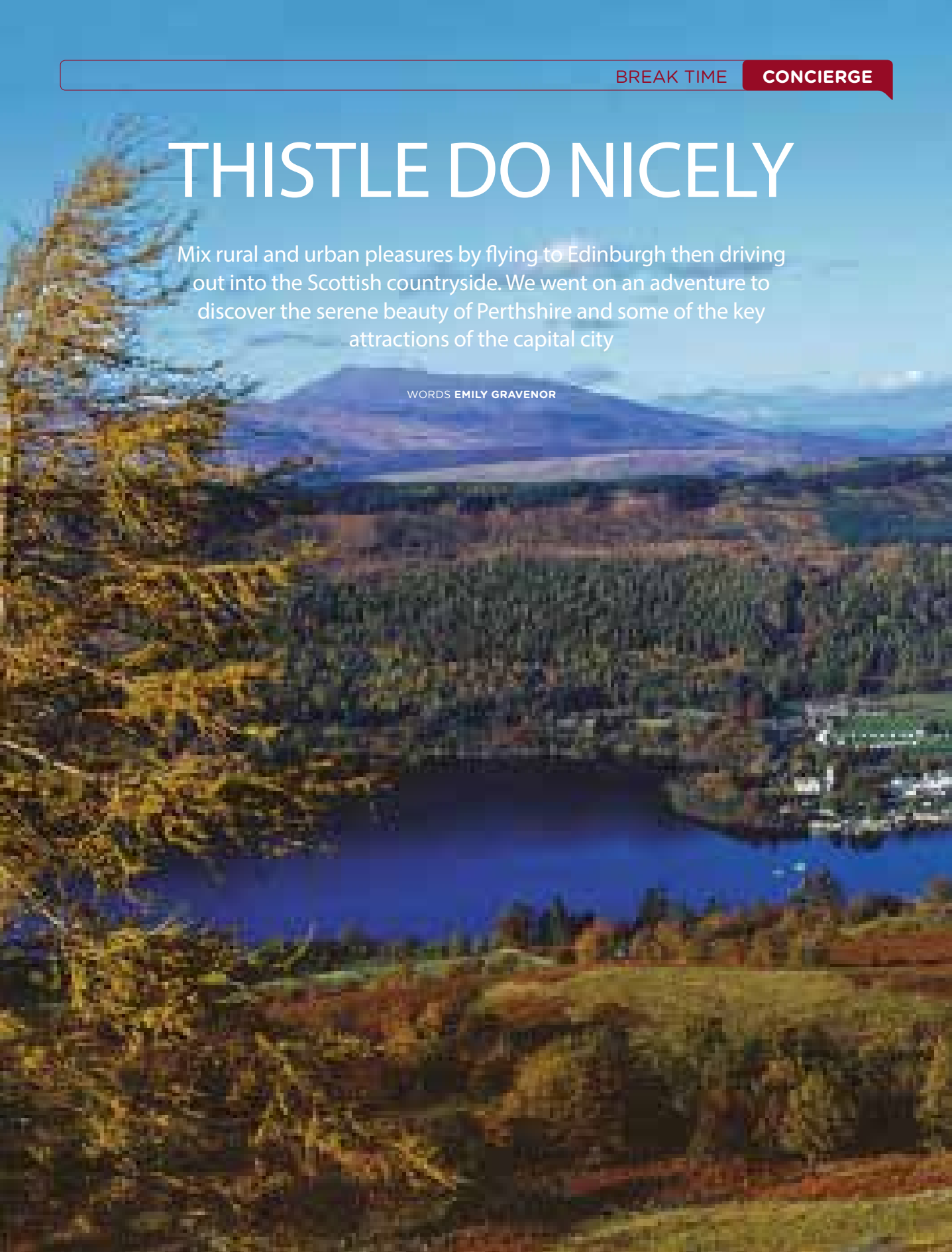


THISTLE DO NICELY

Mix rural and urban pleasures by flying to Edinburgh then driving out into the Scottish countryside. We went on an adventure to discover the serene beauty of Perthshire and some of the key attractions of the capital city

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Opening page: The beautiful Loch Tay and Kenmore Above, clockwise from top: Mains of Taymouth has a range of self-catering cottages, houses and apartments to rent, ideal for families; horseriding at Mains of Taymouth; The Courtyard restaurant; inside Granary Court, with its spacious kitchen and lounge

Having flown into Edinburgh airport, taken the obligatory tourist photographs of us sitting in the giant letters of the Edinburgh sign and collected our hire car, my friend Samantha and I were off on an adventure into the Scottish countryside. I'd never been to Edinburgh or further north before, and Sam was excited about rediscovering her "Scottish roots" so it was quite a high-spirited journey north to Highland Perthshire, not least because I'd been looking forward to driving across the Forth for weeks. The traffic wasn't as slow as I'd have liked, but there was time to admire the impressive feat of engineering that is the iconic railway bridge before we were over and heading for Mains of Taymouth Country Estate and Golf Course in Aberfeldy, some two hours' drive away. As we got closer to our destination, there was some kind of diversion, which the sat nav on my phone, who we christened Brian, struggled to keep up with. It wasn't that he wasn't trying, but he certainly came in for a fair bit of flack as we wound around country roads, missing turnings and wondering if we would always be driving in this beautiful landscape of wind stations, pine-tree forests and a striking feature that Sam assured me was a glacial valley, her eyes welling up with joy in the way that only a geography teacher's could. We were a little like a re-imagined Thelma and

Louise, driving into the Scottish wilderness, only this time in a Vauxhall Astra, on winding roads jollied up by the purple hue of Scottish thistles, and with a growing sense of irritation at Brian, the woefully-inadequate male we'd been assigned in place of Brad Pitt.

Enjoying Aberfeldy

Our first sight of Kenmore left us speechless – it's an idyllic village, where boats bob on the peaceful still of Loch Tay, the sun glistens on the water, and there are charming white houses and a little bridge over the river, all surrounded by steep hills, covered in the dark green of ancient forests; a mixture of oaks, birch and Scots pines. It was undoubtedly worth the drive.

Mains of Taymouth is situated here, on the banks of the River Tay, next to the castle. It's a family-run, 120-acre estate that offers activities such as an award-winning golf course, horseriding and boating, with four- and five-starred luxury self-catering cottages, villas, houses and apartments, all just a few minutes' drive from Aberfeldy.

As soon as we'd parked up and had a quick change of clothes, we were booked in for a horseriding lesson on site. Walking through the estate to the stables, there was a growing sense of nervousness as we recalled the last time we'd sat on a horse – for Sam, some 30 years

ago and for me – never. Thankfully, manager Kerry and the girls who'd be taking us out put us at ease. They helped us to board our reassuringly-gentle horses and managed not to laugh at us as we clambered on in an ungainly fashion. We were led around on the trek, so there was no need to have been worried. The team teach people of all levels, with the more experienced taking on the trails up on Drummond Hill, overlooking the estate. We went on a trek alongside the River Tay, plodding under the trees with the water beside us, and only the odd low-hanging branch or flurry of midges to bother us. The girls gave us advice about leaning back in the saddle to help the horse to balance as we went down any slopes, but aside from that we just sat back and enjoyed the ride, lulled into instant relaxation.

We were staying in Granary Court, a four-bedroomed house with a garden, hot tub and sauna. It was a little like being in paradise – a paradise that came with a hot tub, a bottle of Prosecco and a hamper of local Scottish food from the on-site delicatessen. If it's starting to sound a bit decadent, it might help to know that we also found a stack of jigsaws and I had to beg Sam to come and enjoy the hot tub with me as she spent hours transfixed by a huge 1970s jigsaw she'd laid out on the kitchen table. Jigsaw or hot tub, we were both in our own version of paradise.

The rest of the house was top-notch, too – comfy beds, spacious rooms, an enormous lounge – ideal for a family holiday. Meanwhile, for dinner, you have your own state-of-the-art kitchen but there's also a restaurant on site. The Courtyard gets booked up so we were glad to have a reservation, and I'd definitely recommend the mussels and the salmon, although it all looked good – and reasonably priced, too.

In Aberfeldy and the area, there are several attractions besides the obvious call of the Perthshire countryside – known as 'Big Tree Country'. At Highland Safaris, you can go on a Land Rover tour, pan for gold and gems or go red deer or barn owl-spotting, at Loch Tay Boat Centre you can go kayaking or boating, while Cluny House Gardens is a wonderful wild garden where you can see red squirrels.

Fans of whisky should definitely visit Dewar's distillery, in Aberfeldy. Established in 1846, Dewar's has a new visitor centre and offers an engaging guided tour around the distillery so you can learn about how the blended Scotch is created. There are several different whisky tastings available, too – we got to try some 27-year-old whisky, which, if you were driving, could be packaged up for you to take home with your own Dewar's glass and the ingredients for a simple whisky cocktail – it's delicious with ginger and lime.

A fleeting visit to Falkirk

After a hugely-relaxing couple of days in beautiful Perthshire, it was time to venture back down to Edinburgh. On the way, we stopped off at Falkirk to see the Falkirk Wheel, which is the first rotating boat

Below, from top: The magnificent Kelpies sculptures in Falkirk's Helix Park tell a tale of the region's changing landscape; The Falkirk Wheel is another celebration of Scottish engineering

lift that connects the Forth and Clyde Canal with the Union Canal. It's more interesting to the casual observer, such as myself, if it's moving, which it wasn't when we were there, but it's a real feat of engineering and you can see videos of it on YouTube. A short drive away in the Helix Park are the Kelpies, two magnificent 30-metre-high structures of horses' heads, made from metal, representing equine history and Scotland and Falkirk's heritage, and the transformation of the landscape. They've been made combining cutting-edge technology and artisanal techniques. It's free to see them and it would definitely be one of my top recommendations, as they look even more stunning in real life.

Edinburgh adventure

We were staying at Carlowrie Castle, an exclusive-hire venue that's ideal for weddings or corporate groups, and also has a separate apartment that you can rent out (www.carlowriecastle.co.uk). With its beautiful grounds, amazing art collection and fairytales castle-appearance, it's a very unique place to stay. Our apartment was all thick, plush carpets and trendy, art-focused design with luxurious facilities, a super-stylish living room and, in the main en-suite bathroom, double sinks and a beautiful metal freestanding bath overlooking an immaculate lawn. We were looked after >>





and made to feel like princesses, basically, and it was alarming how easily we became accustomed to this treatment. Jen, the manager, was so friendly, funny and helpful, it's easy to imagine how comforting it would be to have her on hand if you were having your wedding there. We were also treated to a private chef and his charming daughter, Isla, coming in to cook for us. As I said, completely spoilt...

It was hard to make ourselves leave Carlowrie Castle at all, it was such a special place to be. However, to walk off a little of our over-consumption, we ventured into Edinburgh and took a stroll up Arthur's Seat. This ancient volcano in Holyrood Park towers next to the city, with various hiking paths up it and stunning views from the top. It's a good climb but it's well worth it.

Next was Edinburgh Castle – book tickets in advance to save some time in the queue. Once in, join

Above: The beautiful Carlowrie Castle has wonderful grounds, a fabulous team and a lavish, art-filled interior
Below, clockwise from top: Seriously good seafood at Ondine; the Royal Yacht *Britannia*; inside Carlowrie Castle



one of the tours – there is such a range of architecture within the citadel it's really useful to have one of the knowledgeable guides to talk you through it. The views are amazing, there's a 12th-century chapel, and you can see the crown jewels worn by Mary Queen of Scots and also the Stone of Scone – the famous rock that all monarchs of Scotland, England and the UK have sat on (or above) when coronated.

To continue the historical theme, visit The Real Mary King's Close, where costumed characters bring to life four narrow streets, with real town houses and rooms dating back to the 1500s. Hear the stories of people who lived on these streets, between the 16th and 20th centuries, from the maid to the merchant, the plague cleaner to the poet, offering a fascinating insight into Edinburgh's history.

To see a different side of the city, take the bus down to the port of Leith. We bought one-day bus tickets, allowing you to hop on and hop off, then headed downtown along the Royal Mile. Leith has some good seafood pubs and restaurants (we had a quick local beer in The King's Wark, overlooking the Water of Leith, which was a great pub). Down on the waterfront, you'll find the Royal Yacht *Britannia*, the Queen's decommissioned family ship. Take a tour and see the incredible grandeur that the royal family used to holiday in, with its state apartments, royal bedrooms and gleaming engine room, or enjoy a speciality tea or lunch in the extravagant tea room.

In the evening, for a drink in an atmospheric wine bar, try Café Royal, near Princes Street Gardens. It's got a grand brasserie style to it, a really lively atmosphere and it feels chic. For dinner, if you're looking for somewhere special, try Ondine. This is one of the best seafood restaurants in Scotland and a place that several people told us was their favourite restaurant in the city. The service and food is impeccable – starters of Tempura Squid and Wild Sea Bass Ceviche, and mains such as Roasted Shellfish Platter or Guy Greive's Grilled Scallops with spicy sausage are difficult to resist. The idea behind the menu is to take local seafood, but create dishes inspired by international cuisine, and it's one that has clearly won over a lot of happy customers.

When it came time to leave Scotland, after our countryside and city adventure, we were understandably sad. It had been a whirlwind of Scottish fun, but hopefully it won't be too long before we return.

Book before 31st December 2016 to receive a 10% discount off a minimum three-night stay with the Mains of Taymouth Country Estate and Golf Course (excludes festive period). Call 01887 830226 and quote FLYBE to book. Offer subject to availability. www.taymouth.co.uk



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