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Travel

Escape to Prestonfield House

28 November, 2024 | 4 min read

IMAGE | David Cheskin

Ostrich feathers? Leopard-print carpets? Champagne on ice? Yes, yes, yes! Welcome to five-star glamour in the shadow of Arthur's Seat

words Natasha Radmehr **photography** David Cheskin and Laura Tiliman **location** Prestonfield House

Why are we so obsessed with newness? I'm not sure if it's a generational thing or if it's simply human nature, but I know I am guilty of it. Seeking out the latest restaurant launches and keeping tabs on hotel openings is part of my job, of course, but it means that longstanding institutions are often overlooked. This is especially true in Edinburgh, home to Scotland's most dynamic hospitality scene. Prestonfield House, a five-star hotel in the south of the capital, knows a thing or two about that.

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IMAGE | David Cheskin

Here, despite the cobbled streets and age-worn monuments, it is far too easy to be swept up in the allure of the new. Sometimes, though, it's important to check in with the grandes dames for a lesson in how to stand the test of time.

Prestonfield House has been part of the city's fabric since 1687, when it was built by the architect Sir William Bruce as a lavish residence for the Lord Provost of Edinburgh, complete with gilded leather wallcoverings and Italian plasterwork. For centuries it passed between landed gentry, filling up with antiques and artefacts, frescoes and fripperies.

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IMAGE | Laura Tiliman

In the 1960s Prestonfield became a hotel, and in 2003 it was bought by the celebrated hotelier and restaurateur James Thomson. He spent millions on its sympathetic renovation, retaining and restoring its period features and introducing the theatrical – bordering on fantastical – flourishes for which he was already known at stablemate The Witchery.

IMAGE | David Cheskin

My best pal and I know all this before we rock up to Prestonfield House. We've seen pictures of the leopard-print carpets, velvet boudoir couches and carved gilded mirrors. We know it's a bit gothic, a bit Versailles, the kind of place Elton John would (and indeed once did) party in. Yet nothing prepares us for how it will actually feel to spend time here. Before we've even met the concierge, we've already been greeted by two tealfeathered peacocks strutting along a garden path lined by topiary pyramids. When we walk across the marble-floored reception hall to check in, we are inspected by Raven, Prestonfield House's house cat, as he reclines on a chaise longue. I wouldn't bat an eyelid if he started to talk, such is the otherworldliness of this place.

IMAGE | David Cheski. Christmas at Prestonfield House

"If you don't want any hassle, hang up the tassel," we are advised as we enter the Allan Ramsay Suite, one of the hotel's largest, to find an enormous silk curtain tieback half the length of my body in place of the usual do-not-disturb sign. It's unusual, yet probably the decadent suite's most humdrum detail. It is divided in two with a lounge area, a bedroom and two bathrooms, and stuffed to the gunnels with all things bougie and bonkers. Regal purple armchairs, chinoiserie vases, an antique birdcage, a sailor's shell valentine.

IMAGE | Laura Tiliman

The walls of Prestonfield House are lined with a fabric toile, the woodwork painted the colour of merlot and the bathrooms swathed in marble with Venetian glass mosaics. There's a bottle of champagne on ice and Penhaligon's toiletries by the sinks. Quiet luxury? Try operatics-from-the-rooftops opulence. It's a beautiful day so we tear ourselves away from our sumptuous lair for a walk in the grounds, stopping by the circular Georgian stables on our way to meet the hotel's resident Highland cows. Then, as we feel like fancy ladies, we head back inside for pre-dinner cocktails in the Prestonfield House Leather Room, so-named because of its elaborate wall panels made from Cordovan horsehide.

IMAGE | Laura Tiliman

Next door in the Tapestry Room guests are taking afternoon tea, though I'm not sure how they can focus on their scones when the ceiling, ornamented by lions and cupids, is putting on such a spectacular show. We half-expect our meal in Rhubarb, the hotel's restaurant, to be a whimsical Blumenthal-style scenario, but instead we sit down to a modern fine-dining menu with tradition at its heart. We eat sea trout flecked with beads of compressed cucumber and ponzu gel, meaty crab royale brightened by apple and grapefruit, an exquisite beef rump draped over buttery sliced potatoes and smoked celeriac. A perfect tarte tatin arrives for dessert, glistening and golden. The food is flawless. That extends to breakfast at Prestonfield House.

IMAGE | David Cheskin

“These are the best pancakes I’ve ever eaten,” says my pal through mouthfuls of whipped lemon mascarpone. Hungry and dazzled by choice, she has also ordered a smoked Arran cheese soufflé. Why not? We take a final wander through the house to walk it off, stopping for a photoshoot in a glamorous powder room which is far better dressed than we are. We can scarcely believe we’re allowed to use it.

And that’s the magic of Prestonfield. It is the masquerade ball of getaways; a shot of pure escapism. You can look for that portal to another realm in the new kids on the block, but I think you’ll struggle to find it.

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