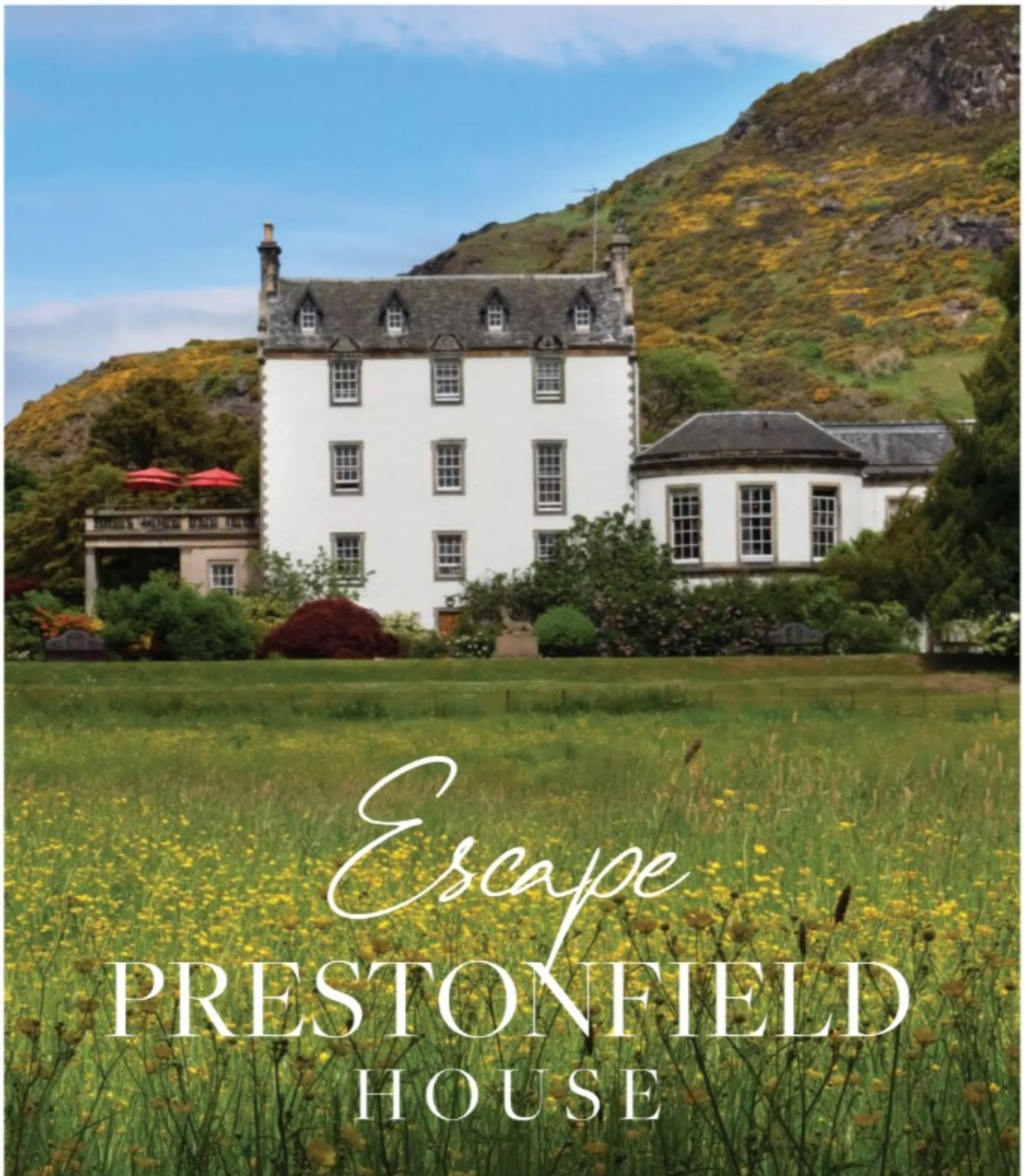


Prestonfield House
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Ostrich feathers? Leopard-print carpets? Champagne on ice? Yes, yes, yes! Welcome to five-star glamour in the shadow of Arthur's Seat

Photography *Laura Tiliman* / Prestonfield Words *Natasha Radmehr*

Previous page and below The architect behind Prestonfield, Sir William Bruce, also transformed Holyroodhouse into a baroque palace. He is widely regarded as the founder of classical architecture in Scotland.

Opposite, top left The Leather Room, once the state bedchamber, is now an intimate drawing room with tomato-red walls and an assortment of classical furniture. Guests are encouraged to sit by the fire, have a drink and play Monopoly. **Top right** The Owner's Suite is accessed by a turret staircase and contains a king-size bed adorned with ostrich plumes. **Opposite, bottom** The hotel has a number of private dining spaces that can be hired for special occasions. The Garden Room is the largest, seating up to 50 people, and is elegantly styled with hand-painted chinoiserie walls



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hy 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. 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, a five-star hotel in the south of the capital, knows a thing or two about that. It 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. 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.

My best pal and I know all this before we rock up. 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 teal-feathered 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'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.

"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. The walls 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 ▶

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Top left There are several public drawing rooms where guests can enjoy a drink, have afternoon tea or just sit and chat. This is the Yellow Room, a real glow-getter with mustard velvet walls that shine in the afternoon sun. **Bottom left** As you might imagine, Prestonfield goes all-out at Christmas (one staff member describes it as being "like a Dickens novel"). Each drawing room has its own Christmas tree and the hotel is festooned with garlands and fairy lights. **Left** The hotel is part of a 20-acre estate incorporating gardens and parkland. A fun fact for you: Prestonfield was the first Scottish estate to propagate rhubarb, and it still grows there to this day. **Below** Helga the Highland cow and her enviable auburn coat



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 Leather Room, so-named because of its elaborate wall panels made from Cordovan horsehide. 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. "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. ■

From £375 per room per night, inc. breakfast. prestonfield.com