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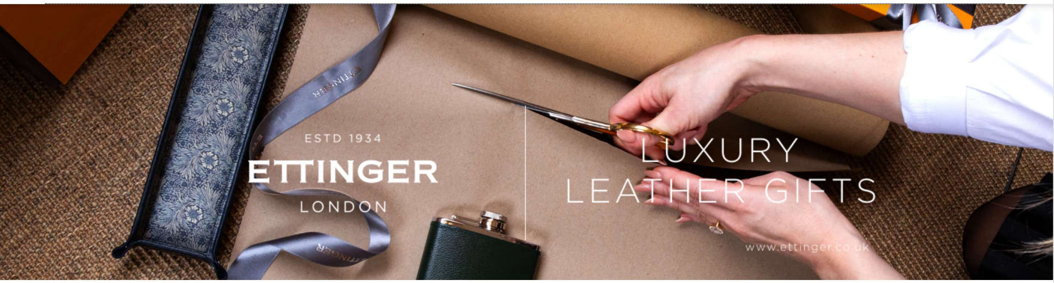
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Witches and magic... Two of Edinburgh's most romantic hotels

Edinburgh is one of the world's most romantic cities – and your accommodation should be similarly swoonsome. Two of the best? Prestonfield House and The Witchery by the Castle

BY **MAX WILLIAMS**

Can you spot Prestonfield House?

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TRAVEL

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TO LAUNCH ONE of your city's finest hotels may be regarded as coincidence; to launch two looks like genius. And James Thomson truly is a genius of the hospitality world.

He was merely 20 years old when he launched The Witchery by the Castle in 1979; barely a decade later and it was not only Edinburgh's most famous restaurant but its most romantic hotel, demand causing Thomson to not only open a second restaurant in the space but add some suites for good measure.

Naturally, his portfolio expanded. He worked at Prestonfield House as a teenage waiter; in 2003, he bought the 17th century property and remains only its third owner in more than 350 years. His multimillion pound refurbishment bought multiple awards and established Prestonfield House as one of the most gorgeous hotels in all of Scotland.

Which to pick? Well, why not both – each hotel offers a dramatically different experience. Pour out a glass of Scotch and read on...

PRESTONFIELD HOUSE

Prestonfield House

Prestonfield House was designed by the great Scottish architect Sir William Bruce way back in 1687. A marble bust of the man who commissioned the house, Sir James Dick of Prestonfield, stands in the corridor – alongside a replica of King Charles's childhood rocking horse. Only the first half of the house dates to the 17th century – everything beyond the dining rooms was built some 150 years later. Although it's a short bus ride from the centre of town, the vibe is very country estate – there are literally cows roaming the adjacent field.

Walking through the entrance, you feel as though you should be removing a top hat. Various sumptuous rooms open off a long corridor: a tea room, a whisky room, a tapestry room if you head upstairs. Sumptuous caves, the lot of them, swollen with sofas, armchairs, ornaments and art. The tapestry room is particularly splendid, boasting magnificent Mortlake tapestries, a gigantic log fire and an outdoor terrace overlooking the gardens. As you traverse the house, numerous portraits of wealthy people in wigs gaze down on you: the walls of Prestonfield House contain the population of a regency court.

The entrance hall

A sizeable number of wig wearers overlook the twin dining rooms of house restaurant Rhubarb: you can invent backstories for them all while awaiting your starter. Expect fresh, seasonal local produce with a real sense of fun. Smoked quail breast comes on this tiny tarragon crumpet with a side of liver parfait. Alva Glen roe deer is served both as two cuts of loin and what I can only describe as a miniature sausage roll – only with venison rather than pig. Also on the plate you will find sweet potato, beetroot, heritage carrot and a jus made from Laphroaig single malt. You get a little of everything: the overall dish is far less overwhelming than it might read on the page and an absolute joy to consume.

Breakfast is a real highlight. You can order to your room but I'd suggest you be social and dine in Rhubarb – the portraits will get lonely otherwise. The full Scottish includes black pudding, white pudding, fruit pudding and haggis, plus your standard staples. It isn't eaten so much as subdued. There's also a substantial afternoon tea that can be taken in one of the drawing rooms. Ask nicely and they'll probably supply a local vicar for the full experience.

Twenty acres of surrounding ground, including an 18-hole golf course, offers ample opportunity to walk off your many meals. Three Highland cows graze peacefully in a field: fear not, these cows are beloved and will not be served up the following Sunday accompanied by roast potatoes and Yorkshire pudding. (The produce is local but not that local.) You may also encounter a peacock named Colin, and Raven the black cat who basically runs the place. The skyline is dominated by Arthur's Seat, looming over the house like a challenge, one whose acceptance will be dependent on your food consumption.

The Churchill Suite

We stayed in the Winston Churchill suite and I suspect the big man would've approved. The experience is akin to being inside a very large red velvet cushion: everything from the walls to the curtains to the chaise lounge is red velvet, although there is also plenty of mahogany in the form of cabinets, desks and drawers. There is a king bed in the bedroom and a daybed festooned with cushions in the living room that can also be used as a sofa. Basically every piece of furniture in the Churchill suite is festooned with cushions: throw your laptop across the room and there's a decent chance it will remain unharmed.

As well as cushions, the primary decor is military regalia: multiple portraits of redcoats, medal collections, a horsehair piper sporran, a large wooden eagle suspended over the daybed. This is not a place for pacifists or republicans. Spend a week here and you'll start planning an invasion of Ireland. It's old school: although the amenities are modern, from the Penhaligon's toiletries to the smart TVs, one in each room. You also get two marble bathrooms so there's no need to draw bayonets should someone take too long on the toilet. Happy days indeed.

Room rates for Prestonfield House start from £375 per room, per night and includes breakfast. For more information, click here

THE WITCHERY BY THE CASTLE

The Witchery is quite simply one of the most wonderful hotels in the world. I'm not saying it's the best – the term is entirely subjective. It lacks many of the amenities associated with great hotels such as a spa, a gym, any sort of communal area. If you want to escape the crowds then I literally couldn't imagine a worse destination: once you're safely ensconced the degree of privacy is remarkable given your location but getting there involves navigating the ocean of tourists flowing down the Royal Mile. So what. Even those immune to The Witchery's wonders must surely acknowledge their existence.

Much of the hotel and its restaurant are located in Boswell's Court, a building that dates back to 1595. It was built for the merchant Thomas Lowthian and named for its most famous inhabitant: the 18th-century physician James Bosewell, whose nephew James wrote a famous biography of Samuel Johnson. It was to James Boswell that Johnson addressed his most celebrated quote: "When a man is tired of London, he is tired of life." Johnson almost certainly dined at Boswell Court, the first of many celebrities to do so.

The Inner Sanctum Suite

Simply accessing the place is an adventure. Despite being located at the peak of the Royal Mile, so close to the castle you're practically laying siege, The Witchery is surprisingly easy to miss. Indeed you're more likely to spot its shop than the main entrance, a small doorway leading to a narrow passage straight out of a fairytale. Follow the passage and you'll find yourself at the restaurant's front desk, which also serves the hotel. A little old woman sat on a pumpkin will offer you three wishes – no, I'm kidding, there's no little old woman although numerous pumpkins were scattered along the passage. (We visited a few days before Halloween.)

There are nine suites in total, split between Boswell Court or Jollie's Close across the street. Each one provides a unique experience, although none are anything less than utterly memorable. We stayed in the Inner Sanctum, the very first suite situated directly above the restaurant and the former residence of James Thompson. Reception manager Paul led the way up a winding staircase and unlocked a large wooden door. Behind the door lay one of the most incredible suites I've ever experienced.

The Inner Sanctum Suite

The Inner Sanctum is a combination of medieval royal chamber and Bohemian hunting lodge. A central study, a bedroom the size of a studio flat, and a bathroom dominated by a cavernous bath that Paul claimed to be older than the United States. Here is a selection of items within the suite. A gigantic bust of Queen Victoria. A four-poster bed. Six stag antlers (more in the study.) A marble fireplace. A soldier's uniform and bearskin hat. Numerous armchairs and sofas. A breakfast table by the window overlooking the Royal Mile – you can get a continental breakfast delivered upon request. In the bathroom, the aforementioned bath and a portrait of James Thompson in his younger years.

Directly outside the windows, half the world's population maintain a perpetual pilgrimage to Edinburgh Castle. You can see them but they can't see you – well, they probably could if you banged on the glass but let's not be vulgar. Instead pour a glass of the complimentary champagne – the hotel's own brand – and tell Alexa to play the Braveheart theme while you unpack your armbands in preparation for the evening's bath. Don't forget to toast James Thompson from the tub.

The Witchery restaurant

The restaurant is practically an Edinburgh landmark in its own right – indeed it was the success of the restaurant that prompted the creation of the suites. The original Witchery opened in 1979, followed a decade later by The Secret Garden on the site of an abandoned schoolyard in Boswell Court. They are linked by a spiral staircase and served by the same kitchen so you could argue it's a single restaurant with separate dining rooms. Who cares? Both are candlelit and swoonsomely romantic, serving appropriately timeless dishes using quality local ingredients. The prices run as high as Arthur's Seat but the memories will last a lifetime.

Here's one of mine. Rising early and walking thirty seconds up to the castle. Its gaze had yet to open but the morning was bright and the views over the city were spectacular. We wandered the esplanade, largely unpopulated at this hour, the queues and crowds yet to form. In one corner stood a fountain dedicated to the many women burned at the stake for witchcraft on this very site – the same poor souls who gave The Witchery its name. There was a touch of magic in the air.

Room rates at The Witchery start from £575 per room, per night and includes breakfast. For more information, click here