

A Dip into Scotland's Wild Side — With a Five-Star Finish

Cassandra Karpiak Feb 21, 2025 Updated 2 hrs ago 0



Image Credit: Cassandra Karpiak.

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Wild swimming may evoke images of rugged dives into icy waters, but in Scotland, locals elevate the experience into an art form. As a Canadian accustomed to the dramatic landscapes of the Great White North, I've long embraced the restorative power of cold-water immersion. But in the Scottish Highlands, this ritual takes on a new dimension — one where the warmth of refined hospitality perfectly balances the thrill of the wild.

Nowhere is this contrast more beautifully realized than in Braemar, a picturesque village in the heart of the Cairngorms National Park. A two-MICHELIN Keys property, the Fife Arms understands the greatest luxuries are those that bring us closer to the wild. And with their bespoke experiences, guests can do just that.

But don't let the rugged nature of wild swimming fool you. The Fife Arms offers a five-star finish to your dip into Scotland's wild side. What sets this luxury hotel apart is its ability to merge the wild and untamed with a level of finesse that feels uniquely Scottish.



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Embrace Scotland's Wild Side

At the heart of this unforgettable experience is [Wild Braemar's Wilderness Sauna](#), set along a secluded stretch where River Connie and River Ey converge. Annie Armstrong, a seasoned naturalist, wild swimmer, and outdoor educator, guides guests on a scenic walk through stunning countryside to this idyllic outdoor paradise. Along the way, she shares her knowledge of local flora and fauna and tales of Scottish folklore.

The ritual begins with a bracing plunge into the river's dark, peaty waters — a jolt to the senses that is as invigorating as it is refreshing. But this is no ordinary wild swim. Unlike the bare-bones dips of untamed adventurers, this experience is meticulously designed for thrill-seekers and comfort lovers alike.

Awaiting swimmers is a forest-green robe, plush and warm, perfect for warding off the post-plunge chill. A cozy tent adorned with tartan blankets offers a refuge from the elements while the wood-fired sauna beckons — its aromatic cedar-scented heat soothes muscles and restores energy, warming you to the core.

The experience transitions seamlessly on repeat, between the sedative swelter of the sauna, an icy plunge, and Annie's favorite — a brief minute in the open air, where steam gently rises from your body as you soak in the breathtaking beauty of Braemar's rugged landscape.

Then comes the post-swim ritual: a steaming hot cup of tea paired with small homemade treats lovingly inspired by Annie's grandmother's recipes — a well-deserved reward for embracing the elements.

A Wildly Unique Experience

Every great adventure deserves an equally exceptional home base, and [The Fife Arms](#) delivers in every sense. A five-star boutique hotel that feels like a living museum, its interiors are a love letter to Scottish culture.

The hotel, a former coaching inn, perfectly captures the grandeur of a bygone era while offering every modern luxury. Famed for its Victoriana suites and curated art installations, every corner exudes charm and character.

After a day spent immersed in the wild, the Drawing Room invites guests to unwind by a roaring fire, the walls lined with books, and the air scented with the earthy aroma of aged whisky.

Here, guests can enjoy afternoon tea sitting underneath an original Picasso or take a private tour of the hotel's extensive art collection, including works by contemporary Scottish artists. More than 14,000 pieces of art hang in rooms, corridors, and corners, each with its own story to tell.

Before dinner, indulge in a cocktail at Elsa's Bar, where the drinks are as creative as the art-inspired atmosphere. Inspired by the iconic fashion designer Elsa Schiaparelli, a frequent visitor to Braemar, this exquisite Art Deco cocktail bar celebrates her passion for bold, vibrant hues of shocking pink.

Dinner at The Clunie Dining Room features *The Clunie River Mural*, a striking installation by contemporary artist Guillermo Kuitca. The menu highlights local ingredients and traditional Scottish dishes with a modern twist. The jalapeno oysters from Cape Wrath are so fresh they'll make you feel like you're eating them straight from the sea, and the Invercauld Estate Venison tastes like a dream after a day spent in the wild.

Another standout is the Swiss-themed fondue restaurant, which displays a chandelier of naturally shed deer antlers. There's also The Flying Stag, a lively public bar, and Bertie's Whisky Bar, inspired by the indulgent spirit of King Edward VII, Queen Victoria's exuberant heir. The Cellar offers a reimagined take on a traditional Scottish croft house, while the Fish Shop serves as both a restaurant and fishmonger in the heart of Ballater.

As the evening winds down, guests are enveloped in the softest linens and feather duvets in their beautifully appointed rooms, lulled by the sound of the nearby River Clunie. A hearty Scottish breakfast awaits in the morning, providing much-needed sustenance for another day of wild adventures.

Beyond the Plunge

While wild swimming may be the most exhilarating way to experience Braemar's untamed beauty, the village and its surroundings offer a [wealth of activities](#) for those who prefer to keep their feet (mostly) dry. Guided hikes through the heather-cloaked hills reveal ancient pine forests and panoramic vistas, while deer-stalking excursions provide an intimate glimpse into Scotland's storied hunting heritage.

For something truly special, guests at The Fife Arms can set forth on a Highland pony picnic, where a team of sturdy ponies carries a gourmet feast into the wilderness, allowing you to dine al fresco in a setting straight out of a Sir Edwin Landseer painting.

The list of experiences offered by The Fife Arms is as varied as the artwork lining the walls. From falconry and fishing to foraging and gin tastings, each one captures a different facet of Scotland's wild spirit.

Five-star getaways are no longer about detaching from the elements — they're about embracing it, knowing that warmth, comfort, and indulgence are always waiting on the other side.

Perhaps most importantly, this balance between wild and refined allows us to fully appreciate both aspects of our surroundings: the raw beauty of nature and the warm embrace of Scottish hospitality.

So, dive into Scotland's wild side at The Fife Arms and embrace the enchanting beauty of Braemar.

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