

Pooh-pooh all you like, the Golden Turd's won me over

The skyline-dominating new W hotel became famous long before it even opened. But what is Edinburgh's most talked about building really like behind that steel swirl, asks **Gabriella Bennett**

Ask a local to direct you to the W Edinburgh and you might be faced with a blank expression. Ask about the Golden Turd, however, and they'll know exactly where you mean. Which is perhaps

why, sipping on a cocktail at the W's panoramic bar during opening week, I tune into more than a few native accents. Years after seeing the hotel's controversial gilded "crown" constructed above the skyline, Edinburgh residents have come to discover what the fuss is about.

The W is a new opening by the Marriott hotel chain, which acquired W Hotels in 2016. Its 244-room Edinburgh destination has been a long time coming, after eventually gaining planning permission in 2015 against the recommendation of city planners. Their criticism? The steel coil embracing the hotel, jutting up above Auld Reekie's sandstone silhouette and finishing in a playful flick. As well as the unfortunate scatological reference, the design by the London architect Jestico + Whiles has been likened to a walnut whip and a silk blindfold.

All of which to say is that W Edinburgh has enjoyed rather a lot of publicity before it even opened. In the flesh it is sleek and international, although its location — sandwiched into a gap within the £1 billion St James Quarter shopping centre and just moments from Waverley railway station — is quintessential Georgian Edinburgh. There is a spa and gym, and rooms range from the standard Wonderful King to the Extreme Wow suite, a penthouse with its own sauna, outdoor shower, pantry and moveable circular bed (from about £5,000 a night). Succession has nothing on this.

From the terrace in my room, a Fantastic suite on floor nine, Arthur's Seat, Calton Hill and the Scott Monument peep over the balcony. Landmarks appear inside too: the minibar's craggy corners are a nod to the city's most famous dormant volcano. The historic Nor Loch appears in figurative form on the top. The living room area (small but fits a sofa) is decorated in mineral tones of burnt orange, onyx and amethyst. I could have done with real walls instead of frosted glass separating the luo and the bedroom but the tub, whose temperature can be set digitally, impressed this water baby.

Don't have the £800-plus it'll cost to stay in the Fantastic suite? Happily even the cheapest rooms have more than a hint of luxe, with full-height windows opening on to balconies overlooking the square, and eye-catching art by Highland-born fashion photographer Jodie Mann.

Back in my room, it would have been only too easy to soak the night away in my tub had the bar not



The W Edinburgh, main, has finally opened; the hotel's controversial exterior, left; The Extreme Wow suite, above

called. This is where the W really comes into its own: set on floor 11, with wraparound floor-to-ceiling windows, the W Lounge captures Edinburgh's star attractions at every turn. All syrups and garnishes on the cocktail menu are made from scratch, we learn from our server, Patrick, whose knowledge of whisky borders on encyclopaedic. Decked out with green fish-scale tiles, a copper-coloured light installation and thin wood panels, its vibe reflects the same Japanese, Brazilian and Peruvian influences in the hotel's decadent main restaurant, Sushisamba.

Breakfast is an equally opulent affair. In the daylight we could see all the way across to Fife from our restaurant eyrie. My Isle of Mull cheddar rösti with poached eggs and hollandaise was only trumped on local sourcing points by my partner's Perthshire mushrooms on rye. It isn't easy to make a dining space work in both morning and evening but Sushisamba manages, thanks in part to a beautiful hammered silver ceiling that brightens the room at 9am and adds opulence at 9pm.

I also loved the 7th-floor speakeasy, Joao's Place, with its collection of

Rio-themed records and chef's table dining experience seating 16. It proves that in a city where traditionalism is king, the W is going boldly in a new direction. Even the most curmudgeonly local would be pushed to find fault sitting in Joao's looking across the twinkling carpet of city lights beyond the window pane. Just nobody mention the poop.

Gabriella Bennett was a guest of W Hotels; marriott.com. B&B doubles from £339

See page 6 for Chitra Ramawamy's review of Sushisamba

George Hotel, Inveraray

This hotel near Loch Fyne has been in the hands of the Clark family since the 1860s. Great atmosphere, especially in the bars. There is an open fire downstairs, and great grub. The hotel, with its Highland-chic rooms, is part of the community, but the main bar is surprisingly cosmopolitan. All Scottish towns should have a place like this (thegeorgehotel.co.uk).

Old Mill, Killlearn

There is more than one inn in this pretty village, but this one is the cosy, friendly one. The building dates from 1774 and is everything an old pub should be. The log fires are brilliant after wintry walks up Dumgoyne — the start of the hill walk is five minutes' drive away. And the inn's garden is brilliant for children in summer (theoldmillkilllearn.co.uk).

The Byre Inn, Brig o' Turk

In the writer John Ruskin's old stomping ground in Brig o' Turk, between Loch Venachar and Loch Achray, a country inn in deepest Trossachs, close to the start of the walk up Ben A'an. Pub grub in cosy, firelit rooms, pizza oven and an inexpensive wine list. A top watering hole for cyclists on the Three Lochs Drive through Queen Elizabeth Forest (byreinn.co.uk).

The Stein Inn, Isle of Skye

Nearby Edinbane Lodge has been stealing the foodie headlines on Skye, but this inn is still the place to go for fireside single malts after long walks on the Waternish peninsula. The inn has been here in a row of cottages on the shore of Loch Bay since 1790. Its tagline is "No road is too long for good company". A special spot (thesteininn.co.uk).

Kay's Bar, Edinburgh

Tucked away on Jamaica Street, this is an original, with the oak casks, Kay's Bar jugs and, of course, a fire. They really care for the beer here and do a bit of grub at lunchtime (anything that goes with HP Sauce). Four screens for rugby only — absolutely no footie (kaysbar.uk).

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5 of the best

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The "Kevin McCloud fantasy" Chalet Iona. Below: Lazell and his son on the Méribel slopes below Dent de Burgin

Skiing holidays will never be the same after this luxe French chalet

Jeremy Lazell checks in at Chalet Iona for indecently pretty food, VIP service and plenty of breathtaking views

I have never eaten an exploding strawberry before. Impregnated with CO₂ using a technique pioneered by Ferran Adrià at El Bulli, it is one of many gastronomic gobsnacks I experience on a recent trip to Méribel with the high-end chalet operator Purple Ski. If spaghetti bolognese, budget plonk and no-frills service are your ski holiday essentials, look away now. For everyone else — especially foodies — Purple Ski is a name you need to remember.

The good news for Scots is that Purple Ski has fully catered chalets in Val d'Isère, Méribel and Courchevel, the last two only two hours' drive from Geneva — with flights currently on sale for just £55 return from Scotland. Purple Ski offers private airport transfers, can have lift passes waiting at the chalet and arranges for a ski hire firm to come to your chalet and fit you out with boots and skis.

Even better news, it isn't horrendously expensive. Three Valleys postcodes don't come cheap — this is the biggest ski area in the world, with 400 miles of accessible pistes — but fill the chalet, pick a cheap week and you're looking at about £1,500 per person, including all meals and transfers. As a father of three who has fought his impatience and rage in ski rental shops across the French Alps, I am telling you the in-house equipment rental service and transfers to the lifts are worth a giant chunk of that sum. It saves vast acres of time too. Catching the first flight out of Edinburgh, we are literally on the slopes by lunchtime.

So far, so that's just what most top-end ski chalet agencies do. Where Purple Ski really stands out is on food. Our chef, Paul Macnish, has cooked for royalty, including Prince Harry, the Earl of Derby and our very



own King Kenny (Dalglish) — and boy does it show. I have eaten at Michelin-starred restaurants, from Le Gavroche to the Gleneagles Hotel, and nowhere have I had a better dish than Macnish's steak tartare starter with truffled egg yolk and foie gras shavings. Just to make those shavings he soaks the foie gras in Hennessy cognac overnight, cooks it in a sous-vide, then freezes it until it is firm enough to shave onto the truffle yolk (itself cooked in a sous-vide, match). Chilli con carne cooked by Tabitha from Tunbridge Wells this is not.

We are staying in Chalet Iona, a six-bedroom Kevin McCloud fantasy of pine and glass, gazing upon a foreverness of Alpine village and summit from its dramatic hillside perch, 1,205m up in the Tarentaise Valley. It has an outdoor hot tub on one of two timber terraces, a sauna, heated boot warmers, a one-bedroom slate-roofed annexe (this has grandparents written all over it), and a record player with a Rolling Stones-heavy vinyl collection in a cosy downstairs lounge. *Bonne chance* leaving upstairs, though. Arranged around a suspended fireplace

where Macnish serves pre-dinner champagne, canapés and fun foodie chat from his open kitchen, the high-ceilinged space is all rustic pine walls and mighty exposed beams, with a vast oak dining table so big it had to be built in situ. Entirely glass at its gable end, it has sweeping mountain views I could gladly have soaked up all day, had they not simultaneously left me itching for the slopes the second I sat down for breakfast.

What Chalet Iona also has — as do all Purple Ski chalets — is an endlessly willing pair of chalet managers, in our case the English twentysomething Finn and his French partner, Marie. Between them they pick us from the airport, deliver us to the slopes, serve our food, clean our rooms, are on hand to pick us up from bars until midnight and appear with champagne and glasses the second we hit the hot tub. Purple Ski gets its fair share of celebrities — its president, Richard Green, was once the chairman of Wasps rugby club, so the sports celebrity count on the guestbook here is high — but Finn and Marie make us feel like VIPs in our own right.

It all makes for a ludicrously lovely stay. We ski, we sip vin chaud by the slopes, we WhatsApp Finn to pick us up. Then sauna, canapés, upload Instagram posts of indecently pretty food, and sleep. On repeat. Macnish raves at one point about another Purple Ski chalet in Val d'Isère called Machapuchare. It was voted France's best ski chalet at the 2023 World Ski awards, and has an indoor pool, gym, hammam and cinema — and 10 per cent off at the end of January and beginning of February. If you can't get hold of me in a couple of weeks' time, you know exactly where I'll be.

Need to know

Jeremy Lazell was a guest of Purple Ski (pupleski.com), which has six nights' full board for 12 people at Chalet Iona from £17,995, including airport and resort transfers, unlimited champagne and wine. Fly to Geneva in winter from Edinburgh and Glasgow with easyJet and Jet2 from about £55 return.

