

TRAVEL
FEATURE

Right: A small boat bobs around on water in front of the beautiful Ardanaiseig Hotel, Kilchrenan near Oban, pictured above

A BREATH OF FRESH AIR

IN SEARCH OF A RELAXING BREAK FROM CITY LIVING, HANNAH RODGER HEADED INTO THE HEART OF ARGYLL. SHE FOUND IT AMIDST BREATHTAKING SCENERY IN AN OLD COUNTRY HOUSE IN TAYNUILT

THE hustle and bustle of living and working in a city can occasionally take its toll and taking a countryside break can be a revitalising treat that doesn't break the bank. That was my first thought when I arranged a two-night stay at the Ardanaiseig Hotel in Argyll, an old, traditional country house venue close to Oban.

It was a crisp, bright sunny day when I set off in my battered Peugeot from Glasgow, punching in the address on my sat nav before making the two-and-a-half-hour journey north.

The route was idyllic, made even more enjoyable by bright blue skies and sunshine all the way. After leaving the motorway and wending my way through fields, towns and villages, taking my usual few wrong turns, I eventually found my destination set deep in the countryside. Surrounded by fields and forest, it seemed like the perfect spot to spend a few relaxing days, catching up on

a good book and enjoying the fresh air. Having briefly researched the area and the hotel before making the trip, I was most excited to find out more about its history and sample a few of the dinner delights boasted about on the menu.

I knew it would be beautiful – the hotel had won an array of industry awards for its beauty and romantic feel – but I was intrigued to see what else the place had to offer besides plush interiors, a good wine cellar and fine dining.

Walking up to the grand, grade B-listed venue, I was greeted by a number of opulent stone statues surrounding a small, circular courtyard. Ivy crawled up the sides of the grey stone country house, and walking through the ajar front door felt like creeping into someone's home unexpectedly. Dark and quiet, I wasn't sure if I had turned up too early and stood awkwardly in the hallway for a few minutes. A smiling face soon appeared from behind a dark wooden door nearby and introduced himself as Paul, one of few staff who worked at the venue all year round.

As I walked along the corridor and up the stairs to my room – a stunning double room called Cruachan with a view over Loch Awe – I noticed a number of unusual artworks lining the walls of the house, and the vivid colourful wallpaper which gave the venue a modern, airy feel.

The room itself was more traditional, complete with a curtained four-poster bed, an array of lamps, a plush armchair and perfectly plump sofa.

I decided to take a tour of the house, and wandered back downstairs into one of the various living rooms which was bright and comfortable looking, with yellow squashy sofas and ornate gold chairs.

Outside, the building's grandeur was even more apparent. Designed by architect William Burn, the house is one of only two of his works in the area. Unlike the nearby Gallanach House, Ardanaiseig's past and current owners have left the outside of the building relatively unchanged while the inside has been adapted to suit its current incarnation as a hotel.

After a few minutes' walk through the sprawling gardens, I found myself down by the loch, looking across the still black water to a number of small houses on the other side. A few small boats bobbed around on the shore, which I later discovered could be hired out by guests to use on short trips across the water, or to examine the remains of an old burial ground on Inishail Island in the centre.

The island, distinctive in the area for its grassy covering as opposed to thick forest, is thought to have been home to a convent and the Chapel of St Fyndoca. I'm told visitors who venture there often spend hours examining the graveyard with large carved tombstones of knights and warriors.

I planned to take a boat out the following day to look at them myself, however, when I woke it was grey and windy, and was advised against sailing. Bikes were also available for guests to use, however I didn't fancy my chances cycling up a windy single track, so I took a 45-minute drive further east to Oban.

The town was everything you'd expect

from a seaside spot in Scotland – plenty of fish and chip shops, quaint craft boutiques and old-fashioned sweet shops mixed in with well-known high street retailers and cafes.

The harbour was busy with large sailboats and ferries coming and going, and locals stopped to chat to one another beside the seafront. It was easy to spend a couple of hours wandering round the place, picking up souvenirs and a few bags of bon bons. For this city dweller, it was also unexpectedly nice to be surrounded, if only briefly, by busy streets and a bit of noise again – a sharp contrast to the atmosphere at Ardanaiseig.

After finishing off a bag of fish and chips, temperatures outside began to drop and I made my way back to the hotel in time for dinner.

The first night I had been treated to a delicious venison dish accompanied by perfectly cooked vegetables and potatoes, with a sweet red wine sauce. Although there had been only two choices for each course on the menu, the meal hadn't

5 THINGS TO DO IN TAYNUILT

Fishing on Loch Awe

The hotel has a team of expert Ghillies who can help with fishing, for a price, or you can go solo and take your chances out on the loch. Rods are also available to hire from the hotel at £10.

Kilchurn Castle

Built in 1450 by Sir Colin Campbell, the castle is one of the most photographed in Scotland and an interesting place to visit. Be warned – access is sometimes blocked by high levels of water, so best keep an eye on the weather before venturing there. It is around an hour's drive from Ardanaiseig, or half an hour by boat across the loch.

Oban's War And Peace Museum

A great place to learn about local maritime and fishing industries, railroads and sport in the area. And enjoy a poke of chips or a 99 while you're at it.

Climb Ben Cruachan

The highest point in Argyll and Bute, Ben Cruachan is surrounded by tales of Celtic myths and legends. The 1126m high mountain may be a stretch for beginners but is a popular challenge among hillwalkers. A huge underground hydro-electric power station lies beneath its central corrie, which is also available for visitors to see.

Wildlife-spotting

Enjoy trying to find some of Scotland's most interesting wildlife while relaxing in the hotel grounds, or taking a quiet walk around the many forests in the area. A few to put on your checklist to start with include the greater spotted woodpecker, Scottish wildcat and chequered skipper.



been a disappointment and I was hoping for a similar result. I wasn't left wanting. Moist and juicy pork belly, fluffy potato bon bons, black pudding and pulled ham hock were delivered by well-dressed waitresses. Although the atmosphere – all shining silver cutlery and stiff white tablecloths – was more formal than I would normally be comfortable with, the taste made up for the awkward environment, and I demolished my meal within minutes. A dessert of chocolate orange mousse was an utter delight.

Satisfied, I went to bed and slept like a log in the four-poster, bigger and comfier than any bed I'd ever slept on. I had been right – two days away in the fresh country air had been better than spending a week off in the city, without a doubt.

Hannah Rodger was a guest at the Ardanaiseig Hotel, Kilchrenan by Taynuilt, Argyll, www.ardanaiseig.com 01866 833 533. Room prices start from £185 per night.