

by Alan Roden

**P**EEKING out from the undergrowth, the fawn appeared ready to take his first tentative steps, oblivious to those watching from afar. But the animal remained absolutely motionless, as if frozen to the spot.

Moments later, reality dawned: the deer was just one of the many statues that are littered throughout the 240 acres of land that surround the mysterious Ardanaiseig Hotel.

There is a celebrated episode of Doctor Who, where the eponymous hero must do battle with statues which come to life when you turn your back or blink. Inspiration may well have come from a visit to Ardanaiseig, given the unnerving experience of discovering a stone life-form upon any given turn as you explore the estate.

A giant bust of a woman with shoulder puffs so large they could perhaps be wings even lives in the fireplace in the grand drawing room.

Elsewhere in this magical hotel, history clashes with modernity as if the Time Lord himself had visited and left behind mementoes from all his trips on board the TARDIS.

On one wall, on the journey between the dining room and the toilets in this baronial home that was built in 1834, hangs a magnificent oil painting... of Bianca Jagger. Elsewhere, a portrait of Lauren Bacall looks down upon guests.

But walk the main stairs to the hotel's bedrooms, and a woman's dress that would not look out of place in Tudor times lurks in the corner. This freestanding artefact is eerily headless.

**T**HE library bar, stocked with an extensive collection of whiskies and green olives so large that only a wizard could produce them, holds yellowing volumes of Encyclopaedia Britannica which contain descriptions of towns and cities as they were long ago.

The mantelpiece in our guestroom carried a copy of Don DeLillo's 1997 novel Underworld, itself a medley of many different time periods.

In the grounds on the banks of Loch Awe, near the tiny Argyll village of Kilchrenan, you can also stumble upon gravestones carrying the names of a lieutenant killed in action in the First World War and an early 20th century Liberal MP for Argyllshire.

On the walk back to the hotel, there are trees that resemble giant spider legs that have no earthly business in Argyll.

Meanwhile, a giant walled garden is empty of everything except for a dilapidated greenhouse where you imagine plants dreamt



up by Tolkien or Rowling could grow.

The dining room, where guests enjoy views of the loch, sums up the clash of cultures in Ardanaiseig: it is dominated by a Victorian masterpiece acquired by a Mafia gangster in the late 1960s.

Tired of the anonymous faces in the work of art, he had them

painted over to display his favourite rock stars, politicians and businessmen.

So Mick Jagger, Ringo Starr, Frank Sinatra, Rod Stewart and Henry Kissinger, all dressed in Victorian garb, now watch over the guests.

Ardanaiseig takes some finding, at the end of a six-mile, single-

Stopping-off point: Kilchurn Castle, on Loch Awe, can be visited by a motorboat hired from the quirky Ardanaiseig Hotel, left

lane road from Taynuilt that leads to Kilchrenan, and then another four-mile track to the loch shore.

For dinner, chef Colin Cairns produced starter options of crisp pork belly, black pudding, prosciutto ham and apple, or fillet of salmon with hot smoked mousse, quail eggs and caviar. The main courses on offer were lamb and confit shoulder, with white beans, roast garlic and aubergine, or pan-roasted fillet of cod with broccoli, haggis and crispy egg yolk.

The combinations were eccentric – perfectly suited to Ardanaiseig – and such delicate care was taken with presentation that Colin will surely star on Masterchef any day now.

The portions were small, but anyone still hungry can simply order the cheese for dessert. The generous selection features six wildly different varieties from Scotland and France.

However, while dinner is thoroughly enjoyable... the breakfast is exquisite. A choice of grilled Inverawe kipper, smoked salmon

or smoked haddock with eggs, or a full Scottish, sets guests up for a day of exploring the grounds or Loch Awe.

**A** motorboat can be hired from the hotel for excursions on the loch. Picnic hampers are supplied and most of the tiny islands provide exclusive alfresco dining options such as the 15th-century Kilchurn Castle.

Back at Ardanaiseig, enjoying views from the drawing room as the sun began to set, a tiny deer emerged from the undergrowth.

The guests blinked: this time it wasn't a statue.

#### TRAVEL FACTS

ARDANAISEIG Hotel, Kilchrenan, Argyll PA35 1HE. Bed and breakfast from £218 per room; dinner, bed and breakfast from £299. Book via [www.ardanaiseig.com](http://www.ardanaiseig.com), call 0871 221 3970 or email [hello@ardanaiseig.com](mailto:hello@ardanaiseig.com)

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