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Time for restoration! Stay in a 200-year rewilding project

A revived Victorian lodge offers cosy comfort amid the rugged Alladale Wilderness Reserve, which is restoring Caledonian forest — and may even bring back lynx, writes **Lisa Kjellsson**

Bathed in afternoon sun, the glen spreads out before me, framed by rolling hills. The river running through it is perfectly clear, reflecting the bluest of skies. I appear to have stepped into an oil painting brought to life — but as pristine as it may seem, this is a landscape in recovery.

As a Swede, I can't help drawing comparisons with Scandinavia. Sutherland's rugged, mountainous terrain, with its sprawling glens, rivers and lochs, and pine and birch woodlands, reminds me of Lapland. Had I travelled to the era of the early Scottish kingdoms, there would be much of the same wildlife too — elk, brown bear, wolf and lynx. Sadly they're long gone from these shores, and the Caledonian forest is dangerously close to vanishing too. Just 2-4 per cent remains after centuries of felling and overgrazing.

It's something Alladale Wilderness Reserve is trying to address. Here in the exhilarating wilds 50 miles north of Inverness I spot distinctly gnarly pine trees in pockets of old-growth forest. "We're trying to piece together fragments," the reserve manager, Innes MacNeill, says.

MacNeill's team have planted more than a million native trees, mostly Scots pine but also willow, birch, alder and aspen, and the hard work is beginning to pay off: the black grouse has returned and golden eagles are nesting here once again. Handing me a pair of binoculars, MacNeill points out a nest high up on a hillside, but restoring the Scottish ecosystem is "a 200-year project in the making".

The turning point for Alladale came when the MFI furniture chain heir Paul Lister bought it in 2003. Swapping fast furniture for conservation, he had already founded the European Nature Trust, which runs rewilding projects in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Romania. In the Highlands he eschewed the traditional hunting, shooting and fishing format in favour of boosting biodiversity — and educating guests.

I stay at Alladale's elegantly restored seven-bedroom Victorian lodge, complete with a snooker room, cosy fireplaces, antler chandeliers and stags grazing on the lawn. Elsewhere on the 23,000-acre estate are a couple of secluded two and three-bedroom stone cottages — one nestled in a glen, the other by the river — and a light-filled yoga studio.

In the space of a long weekend I explore a region marred by the Highland Clearances but brimming with newfound hope. I learn about the importance of restoring not only the Caledonian wood but also Scotland's peatlands and reintroducing apex predators to control the deer population.

Lister's vision has always been to bring wolves back to Scotland, to regenerate the landscape and create a whole new rural economy around wildlife tourism. His inspiration is Yellowstone National Park in the US, where wolf-watching generates more than £60 million every year.

Reintroducing wolves, even in a fenced wilderness reserve, has proved controversial in Scotland. In any case, Lister would need to double his 23,000 acres, or get neighbouring estates to join the project. "I'm more interested in seeing lynx released into the wild," he says.

5 of the best

Fishing lodges
Kevin Adams

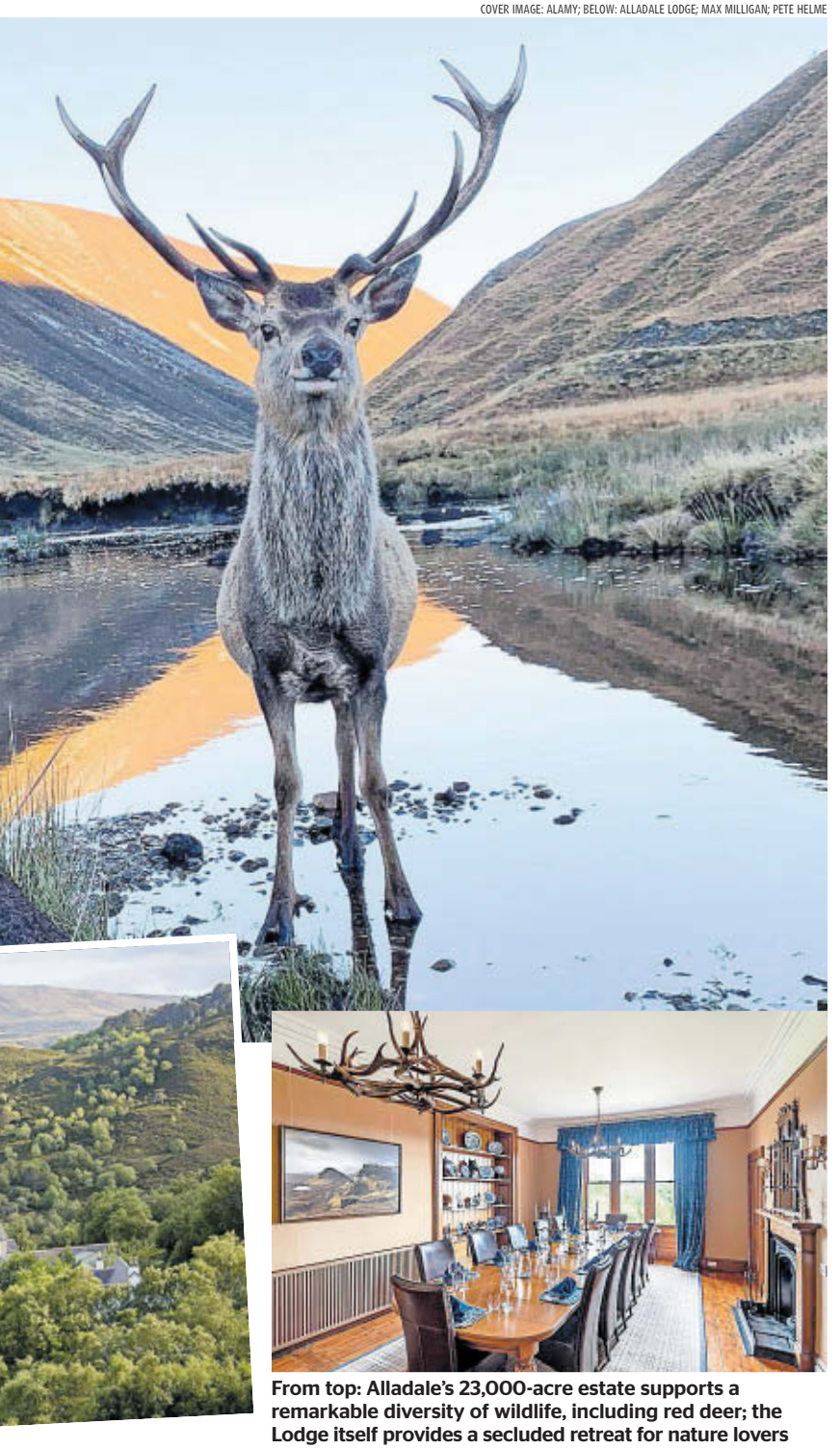
Oykel Bridge Hotel, Sutherland

This famed fishing lodge has elegant rooms in the main house and simple but cosy ones in the bothy. Salmon fishing on the Oykel, both Upper and Lower, is so renowned that it can be hard to reserve. However, the nearby lochs also provide excellent brown fishing — like Craggie, only 20 miles from the hotel.
B&B doubles from £115, oykelbridgehotel.com

Ballathie House, Perth and Kinross

This stately country house hotel by the Tay has such comprehensive fishing that you can, if your luck holds, catch any UK game fish you care to mention. The best rooms are in the main house but there are also lovely rooms in a separate riverside building and three-star Sportsman's Lodge in the grounds.
B&B doubles from £88, ballathiehousehotel.com

COVER IMAGE: ALAMY; BELOW: ALLADALE LODGE; MAX MILLIGAN; PETE HELME



From top: Alladale's 23,000-acre estate supports a remarkable diversity of wildlife, including red deer; the Lodge itself provides a secluded retreat for nature lovers

In the meantime, Alladale continues to care for its four Scottish wildcats housed in a breeding enclosure. They are part of a recovery project that has so far released at least 35 of the functionally extinct animals in the Cairngorms, some of which have already had kittens.

By the end of my retreat, where days out hiking were interspersed with wild swimming and venison dinners, I've started to see the wider picture. Lister's bold ambitions for the Highlands may not all come to fruition in the foreseeable future, but he has certainly succeeded in raising environmental awareness.

"People get emotional when they learn about the history here, the torment of it over the centuries and how we are trying to put it back together," he says. "Hopefully our efforts will have a wider positive effect. I want people to leave here thinking differently, and for their stay to be a springboard for action."

The wolves may not have returned yet, but something wild and exciting is undoubtedly back: hope.

Lisa Kjellsson was a guest of Alladale , where the lodge is available on exclusive hire (POA) and cottages cost from £4,000 a week, self-catering for four (alladale.com)

Shieldaig Lodge, Highland

With 26,000 acres to fish, including the delightful Fairy Lochs, this luxury boutique Highland hotel has a firm following among anglers. If you're new to fly fishing the hotel has reasonable rates to get you going with one of its skilled instructors. You can also try your hand at the traditional art of creel fishing here. B&B doubles from £155, shieldaiglodge.com

Merkister Hotel, Orkney

This famed 16-bedroom hotel is *the* place on Orkney for fishing, all but dipping a toe in Loch of Harray, Orkney's best fishing loch, 15-20 minutes' drive from either Kirkwall or Stromness. Superior rooms overlook the loch. Using the hotel as your base you can explore any one of the six main fishing lochs of Orkney. B&B doubles from £170, merkister.com

Grimersta Lodge, Lewis

A stay here promises one of the most exciting fishing sights anywhere in the world, when salmon and grilse prepare to enter the system of lochs and streams below the hotel. Remember: no fishing on Lewis on Sundays. B&B doubles from £400, grimersta.com

Taken from *Wild Fishing* by Kevin and Jill Adams (£18.99 Wild Things Publishing)

ALAMY

Béziers' Market of Les Halles brims with delicious truffles, chestnuts and fine wines in the months ahead

Is this French stay the most indulgent prison break ever?

Once home to 300 inmates, Hôtel La Prison now lets you do hard time with art, croissants and a pool — and it's criminally good. By **Charlotte Munday**

Above: Béziers, France. Below: the hotel retains decor from its prison years

Béziers is the kind of town where you can behave like a saint — and still end up sleeping in a prison that staged a guillotine execution as recently as 1949.

Don't worry, though: confinement here these days is something not to dread but to desire. Opened in 2023 Hôtel La Prison is now a boutique destination, its designer decor and modern amenities contrasting with the raw and real edges of a prison that housed up to 300 inmates before its closure in 2009. Less rats and overcrowding, more mini croissants and fluffy towels. Swimsuit required, orange jumpsuit optional.

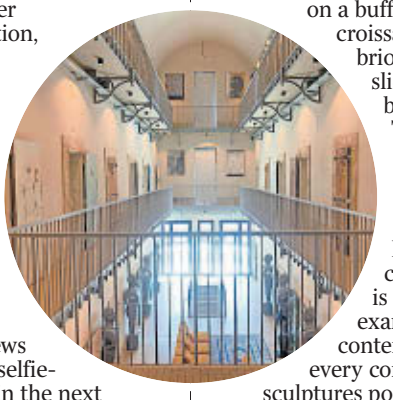
Forget about a long carpeted corridor — the three-tiered gallery here remains, with thick steel doors spanning each side. I opened the heavy (real!) cell door to reveal a small room with two single beds (plush doubles also available), a desk and some quirky pieces of 1950s-style furniture. Luckily no bunkmate. Fan on, shoes off, blinds down: I settled down to start my sentence.

The whole thing is chic and stylish. Artwork on the walls is bold, with every crack and dent enhanced as a feature that carries the room's past. In contradiction, the bathroom shines with recently renovated plumbing. The views from the window are stunning. That night, hot and bothered by an unfortunate lack of air conditioning, I stood up on my bed and drew the curtain ever so lightly to watch the city sleep. The bars were no longer in the windows, but something told me I was not the first occupant of cell 203 to have gazed across this view.

Beyond the bars, Béziers is a superb city to explore by foot, with wide boulevards, Haussmann-style façades and an old town crowned by an impressive gothic cathedral. Come, as I did, when it's 37C in the shade, and Le Petit Train (£7, lepetittraindebeziers.com) is an even better bet, taking in all of Béziers' big hitters: its churches, parks and ponds in a 50-minute loop around town. The Fontaine Musicale at Place Jean Jaurès is another brilliant summer option, with a free musical fountain dancing to the beat of popular songs.

In autumn, Béziers gets even better, the Canal du Midi turning into a leaf-carpeted catwalk, the cathedrals and cobbled squares offering postcard views without the jostling selfie-stick crowds. Come in the next few weeks and you'll find local markets brimming with truffles and chestnuts, speciality *cavistes* brimming with wine, pavement cafés basking in the heat of a sun still warm enough for long, lazy lunches. Without the tourist buzz, Béziers in autumn feels more intimate, affordable and irresistibly local.

Back at Hôtel La Prison in the middle of summer, however, the water in the lap pool was surprisingly nippy, especially on an overcast morning before the sun had burnt through and breakfast had been served — a combination of events that left me shivering.



No, breakfast wasn't thrown under my door on a metal tray, rather it was served in the bar, where I feasted on a buffet of mini croissants, baguettes and brioches, fresh fruit, sliced cold meats and bacon and eggs.

The set-up felt laid-back; this was no canteen.

Exploring the prison afterwards, I felt like a small child again. There is something to examine and contemplate around every corner, with sculptures positioned at every twist and turn. Despite the differences in every piece, nothing felt out of place.

No amount of paintings or mid-century modern furniture, however, could take away from the hotel's history. Thick, stone walls remain completely untouched, unbothered by the passage of time and the portraits they now bear. The brick is still chipped, cracked and graffitied by those who were once here for a *bit* longer than the 12pm checkout time.

Even with its fresh linens and curated art, Hôtel La Prison never lets you forget where you are — and that's exactly the point. It's this friction, between past and present, comfort and confinement, that makes a night here more than just a quirky stay. In Béziers, beauty and brutality have always lived side by side — at this remarkable hotel it just comes with croissants and wonderful art too.

Need to know

B&B doubles at Hôtel La Prison cost £95 (beziers-hotel-la-prison.com). Fly from Edinburgh to Béziers Cap d'Agde with Ryanair from about £40 return