

# Private Island Hideaway

*The Isle of Eriska is a small, private island on Scotland's west coast. It's only a three-hour train trip from Glasgow, but it feels like another world. **Giselle Whiteaker** explores this five-star island haven.*

peer into the darkness through the car window as we bump and rattle over the bridge, hoping to get some indication of where we are, but it's pitch black outside. The headlights illuminate the trees fringing the winding road, which opens up onto the gorgeous main house. This building lies close to the centre of the island and has been the focal point since 1884, although Eriska's history dates back further than this – the recognition of this isle as a sanctuary stems from the earliest written title deeds, back in the 15th and 16th centuries. The property is blanketed in history, but more importantly on this chilly winter's night, it's warm and welcoming.

My friend Darryl and I have been wanting to come here for a long time and we're excited about the weekend ahead. We're keen to fling open the curtains in our generously sized room and see our surroundings,

but that's going to have to wait until morning. Instead, we take a seat by the open fire, clinking our glasses of red wine in appreciation of the warm glow.

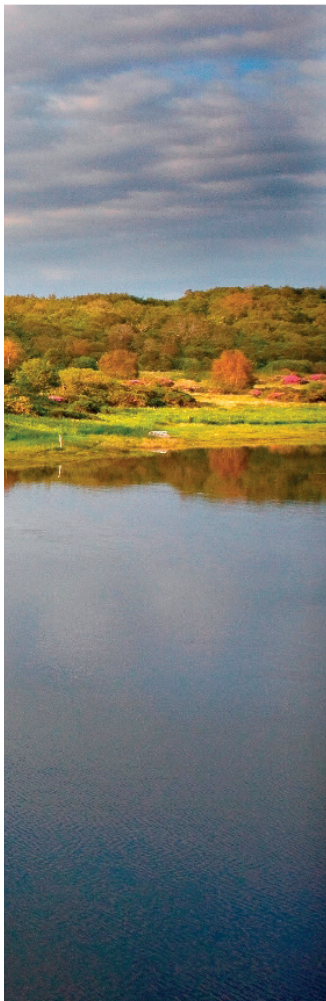
A selection of hors d'oeuvres appears in front of us and we nibble on the delights, which include a delightfully crunchy cauliflower crudité with Mull cheddar, cream and tarragon salt and smoked salmon on waffle, drizzled with heather honey and fennel yoghurt. It's the perfect introduction to a meal that we know is going to impress – the restaurant was awarded its first Michelin star last year. Our expectations are exceeded. The wedges of buttermilk loaf and stout-infused oat loaf are crusty accompaniments to the Celeriac soup with junipers that appears before us. The liquid has been aerated and is so light and fluffy that it is like eating a subtly flavoured cloud. Darryl is so impressed with this that he follows this up with Cullen



The main house on the Isle of Eriska



Eriska bridge in foreground



Skink, a thick Scottish soup traditionally made with smoked haddock, potatoes and onions. This version of the creamy soup contains a small island of parsley root, crispy chicken skin, braised onion and lumpfish roe and Darryl's eyes light up as his taste-buds encounter the exquisite combination of flavours. I've chosen the Scotch beef fillet tartare, which arrives draped around a kohlrabi cup filled with a mouth-watering combination of herbs and smoked mayonnaise. The peppery tartare melts in the mouth, contrasting with the crisp kohlrabi, the fresh flavours balanced with sourdough crumbs.

We both opt for the Isle of Gigha halibut for mains, a pile of seaweed-braised potatoes, young leek and smoked Glen Coc mussels tumbling across the perfectly cooked fish fillet. Every mouthful is a delight and it leaves us with just enough room to sample a selection of flavours from the extensive cheese trolley that has been whispering my name since I entered the dining room.

Pleasantly full, we ensconce ourselves in the cosy bar and chat with the friendly bartender, Gabriel. Gabriel disappears for a few moments and when he returns he places his fingers to his lips and we hush our laughter. "Do you want to see the badger?" he asks, motioning us to join him by the window. Sure enough, outside is an enormous black and white striped fellow, snuffling up the scraps left out for him. He pauses at the sound of our exclamations, but soon forgives us, devouring the remnants before lumbering away into the night. This is our cue to do the same.

The first thing we do in the morning is gaze out of our picture windows, over the grounds. A small lake lies off to our left and the lawns stretch to a line of trees. Even in the colder weather the colours are stunning, all russet reds, emerald green and golden yellow.

After a hearty breakfast we slide our feet into borrowed wellies and set off to explore the island. The air is brisk, but we breathe deeply, drawing in the woodland aromas. Birds flit from tree to tree as we wend our way back to the bridge. The tidal flats stretch to mountains in the distance and around the bend we can make out the partly submerged Crannog, the remains of a fortified dwelling from the Bronze Age that are barely distinguishable from rubble. Our imagination rebuilds the dwelling as we roam, feeling like we own the island. There is not a soul to be seen. It's just us and the somewhat elusive

deer that are said to lurk here, although we have yet to spy any.

Our ramble takes us past Eriska's impressive new hilltop residences and up to a viewpoint overlooking the island's west coast. We discover Arnott's House, dating from the 19th century, on our way downhill before we reach the shoreline. From here, we follow the coast, aiming for Otter Point, so named for the playful critters quite often spotted here. The rocky beach has a stark beauty, even with the grey clouds hovering ominously overhead and we fossick for shells as we amble.

"Look," Darryl whispers, holding out his arm to block my passage. We both freeze. On the rock ahead, an otter is sitting curiously upright. We both fumble for our cameras and quickly snap a few shots. "Why isn't it moving?" I ask, inching my way forward, shutter clicking all the while. I zoom in close and observe the otter's glistening haunches. It hasn't done so much as twitch. "It's not real. Is it?" I question in a louder voice. Still no movement. I take three giant strides until I am standing before the creature, cast in bronze, and we both burst out laughing at our tentative approach. This is the only otter we see all day.



We follow the golf course back to the main house, arriving just in time for afternoon tea. We know we should show restraint as we'll be dining

here again this evening, but the scones with clotted cream, the sweet crumbly shortbread, and the sublime hazelnut mousse-filled choux pastries slowly disappear, as does the afternoon, all washed down with a pot of Earl Grey tea.

Before we know it, we are packing our bags, ready to depart. We haven't made use of the hotel's superb indoor heated swimming pool and spa facilities, nor have we engaged in the myriad activities on offer. We have, though, dined on superb fare, enjoyed attentive service and been fooled by an otter. We're relaxed and content with our island idyll. And that's more than enough. ■

**The Isle of Eriska's recently re-launched luxurious spa features a state-of-the-art thermal suite with sauna, steam room and Rasul room. There will also be two additional treatment rooms with statement baths, showers and stunning sea views over Loch Linnhe, as well as a new Life Fitness Gymnasium. Dinner, bed and breakfast rates start at £167 per person. For more information see [www.eriska-hotel.co.uk](http://www.eriska-hotel.co.uk).**