



The estate for all seasons



It is the country estate within which The Coniston Hotel nestles that makes the drive to Yorkshire so worth the effort, writes Giselle Whiteaker

Embracing the southern tip of the Yorkshire Dales, the location of the Coniston Hotel and Country Estate is stunning throughout all four seasons. The snow dusted trees create a magical winter wonderland and in spring, wild flowers carpet the dales. Blue skies and sunshine pick out the vibrant colours in the lush fields in summer, while autumn sees the changing hues of the leaves to magnificent effect. Whenever you choose to visit, you will find yourself cultivating a long-distance gaze, to take in the glory of the undulating Yorkshire landscape.

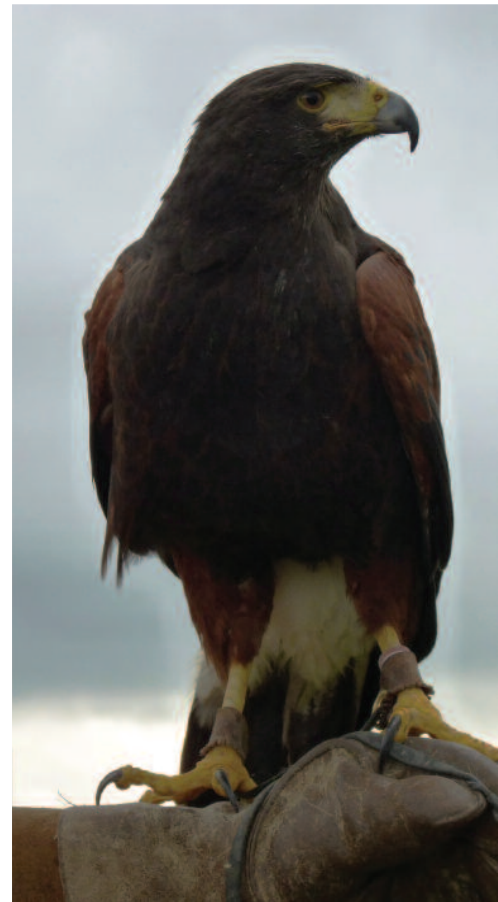
Nestled between the market towns of Skipton and Settle, the recently expanded Coniston Hotel has a total of 71 bedrooms with unrivalled views across the estate. Picture waking up in the morning, opening the curtains, and stepping out onto the balcony, looking down towards the lake as a few ducks sail gently along the reed bank. On the far side of the water you can just make out a small flock of sheep, grazing in the sloping paddock. This is how all mornings should start.

If you can't drag yourself away then order breakfast in and stay right where you are. The Yorkshire Breakfast is the

ideal way to start the day, and the Eggs Benedict served with crispy pancetta is also hard to beat. Whichever you choose you can work it off with a stroll around the grounds post-feast. Trails range from a leisurely stroll around the lake to a more strenuous tramp up hills and down dales – literally. If it's muddy out you may want to borrow some of the hotel's wellies. If you are feeling more adventurous, mountain bikes are available for hire and the hotel provides trail maps.

One of the distinctive aspects of the Estate is the number of activities on





offer. Try your hand at fly fishing on Coniston Lake or the ancient art of archery; opt for a relaxing beauty treatment or learn new offroading skills with the Land Rover Experience. The Coniston is also home to a CPSA Premier Status shooting ground, one of the best shooting grounds in Europe with top instructors on hand to develop your skills, whether you are an absolute beginner, or an experienced clay shooter.

The undeniable feather in the cap of the Coniston is the Falconry Centre. Mark Priestly is the font of all falcon-related knowledge and he will guide you through the falcon experience. There is a two-hour family experience, a half day and a full day option to choose from.

If you are coming for the falcon experience, you will be fortified with a bacon sandwich before starting - you are going to need your strength. The experience is designed to be as

hands on as possible, so you will be handling and flying the birds within an hour of starting. Despite this warning, we didn't quite know what to expect when we arrived at the centre. We ambled along the cages peering at the birds, unable to identify the species, realising we knew less than we thought.

After discovering a few basics we met our first un-caged bird, a friendly Bengal Eagle Owl by the name of Bombadil. We donned heavy leather gloves and one-by-one we lured him to feed from our hands. This is not for the squeamish. These are birds of prey and their prey during this exercise is baby chickens. As Bombadil landed on my arm and snatched the food from my grasp, I discovered a whole new respect for this creature, although as he hooted softly for attention Mark educated us on the owl's lack of intellect. Soon we would be dealing with a far more intelligent bird.

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Laura the Harris Hawk demanded respect from the start. Free from her confines she lifted up to the roof of the barn and I wondered if we would see her again. There was nothing to fear. She knew where her next meal was coming from, and it was us, so as soon as we raised our arms in the gesture for food, she swooped gracefully in to land on our wrists and tore the meat from our grasping hands.

As a finale to our half day experience, Mark offered us something special – the chance to fly a Golden Eagle. This is not part of the regular falcon experience but is available at an additional cost. The Golden Eagle is one of the most powerful predators in the avian world. For this we would need our strength and our wits about

us . . . and an extra thick glove to give protection from the unwittingly sharp claws. This bird has a vice-like grip with talons that exert around 440 pounds per square inch of pressure, far more than the human hand is capable of. Ghengis the Golden Eagle is an extremely large bird. Weighing in at around 11 pounds and with a wing span of six feet, seeing this bird in flight is nothing less than spectacular.

We trudged up a nearby hill while Ghengis soared away seeking the wind currents. Up, up he flew until he found the breeze. I raised my arm tentatively and in he swooped, pushing his body into an aerodynamic shape at high speed. He landed in a flurry, one wing over my head as he shuffled for balance. He is dexterous, forcing his

hooked beak into my clenched fist to seek out every morsel. Mark helps me maintain the height of my arm under Ghengis' weight. We repeated this time and time again and it never fails to impress.

At the end of the day we found ourselves in the hotel's restaurant, McLeods. Under the tutelage of the chef, we selected several of the game dishes from pheasant to partridge and grouse to estate wild duck. Every morsel was delicious and despite our sated stomachs, we cannot resist the treacle tart with caramel crunch ice cream for dessert. A final aperitif in the Huntsman's Lodge where a fire crackles, warming the cool night air and our day ends the way it began – with us gazing into the distance, replete.

Contact the Coniston Hotel and Country Estate on tel: 01756 748080 or email: info@theconistonhotel.com. For more information see: www.theconistonhotel.com

