

Scotland's hotels are filling their walls with art and providing settings that are designed to encourage guests to explore their own creativity, finds Rosie Conroy

Scotland's long and romantic history with the arts is tangled through the ages. It started with Neolithic symbols carved into her hillsides and meanders through Celtic texts, Renaissance portraiture and 19th-century landscapes, through to the Glasgow Boys and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, who cemented the country's standing in international circles.



With that breakneck brief history there's no denying that art in Alba is nothing new, but the way that we're now interacting with it has become more nuanced, more experiential and something visitors are specifically seeking out. Answering the call for creativity tourism is Scotland's art hotel set, a smattering of openings concentrated on crafting luxurious stays for those interested in experiences beyond bed and breakfast.

The shiniest, most obvious example is The Fife Arms in Braemar, with its Picassos and Hirsts. It's an operation backed by global gallery and hospitality firm Hauser & Wirth, but there are quieter, more organic offerings too.

Artist Jonny Gent's Boathouse is an escape on the northern shores. 'I've always been fascinated by studios,' he says, a concept that he wanted to include in his hotel when it opened in 2022. It now houses an artist in residence programme as well as a listening room and regular exhibitions and events.

His is a space filled with the great and the good of the art world; characters



ABOVE: Ruth Kramer and Clare Basler's mural in the dining room at Lundies House in Sutherland.

LEFT: Jonny Gent's Boathouse.



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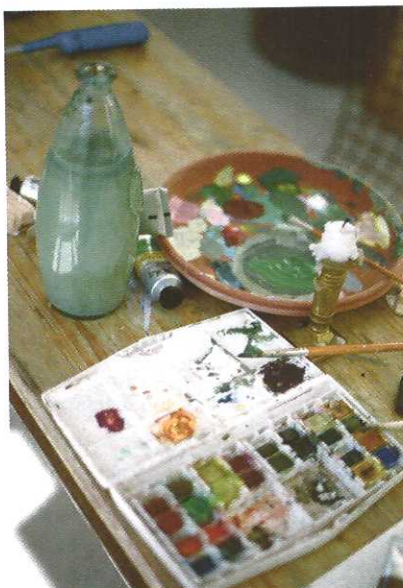
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interior designer Luke Edward Hall to singer songwriter Billie Marten and photographer Joanna Piotrowska.

Famous or not, whoever you are, he says he has created a destination to get lost in. Sometimes that manifests itself in guests reaching for the paint brushes themselves, and during other moments it's about people simply being able to enjoy the environment.



The environment is one that Gent has worked hard at emptying (there are no TVs and very few decorative items beyond key pieces of art), to leave room for expression in all its forms. The results are hundreds of works produced by guests, left on pin boards or in the garden studio, a collection he's intending to archive in a book someday.

'I can't bear decoration, really. I wanted somewhere to fill people with peace and comfort, so the idea is that you strip away stuff so when people arrive, they aren't bombarded with stuff, which hopefully helps them achieve something creatively.'

Arguably one of the first examples of an art stay in Scotland, private island Eilean Shona was bought by Vanessa Branson nearly 30 years ago. Here she transformed the Victorian hunting lodge and a handful of cottages into luxuriously furnished, art-filled spaces.

'Sometimes I wonder if people staying in the cottages know they're looking at gallery-worthy pieces,' she says as she recalls works she has collected, including pieces by Grayson Perry et al. No matter, as she explains