

A LABOUR OF LOVE

Joshua King heads for Royal Deeside and a close encounter with an eclipse and a home away from home

My fiancée and I are standing in the foothills of the Cairngorms with the new custodians of Callater Lodge, staring into the clouds. Somewhere up there, a once-in-a-generation solar eclipse is under way, and Katy and Julian Fennema have brought the goggles.

Katy and Julian, 37 and 39 respectively, bought the historic lodge-come-B&B six months ago and, despite their fresh-faced appearance, have just completed an arduous and physically grueling renovation of the entire property.

Winter was tough. With no boiler for several weeks, paint froze as they brushed it on to the skirting boards and Julian was forced to camp in the garden. But the 12-hour days and seven-day weeks slogging with hacksaws and paintbrushes have paid off.

Built in 1861 as a shooting lodge for a wealthy Victorian society man, the property has been run as a renowned guest house for more than half a century. Now in the guardianship of the Fennemas, the latest iteration of Callater Lodge boasts six luxurious ensuite bedrooms – three double, one twin, one family and one single room – as well as a breakfast room and sumptuous lounge. Our bedroom – Clova – was home to an immense four-poster bed clad in 100% Egyptian cotton sheets.

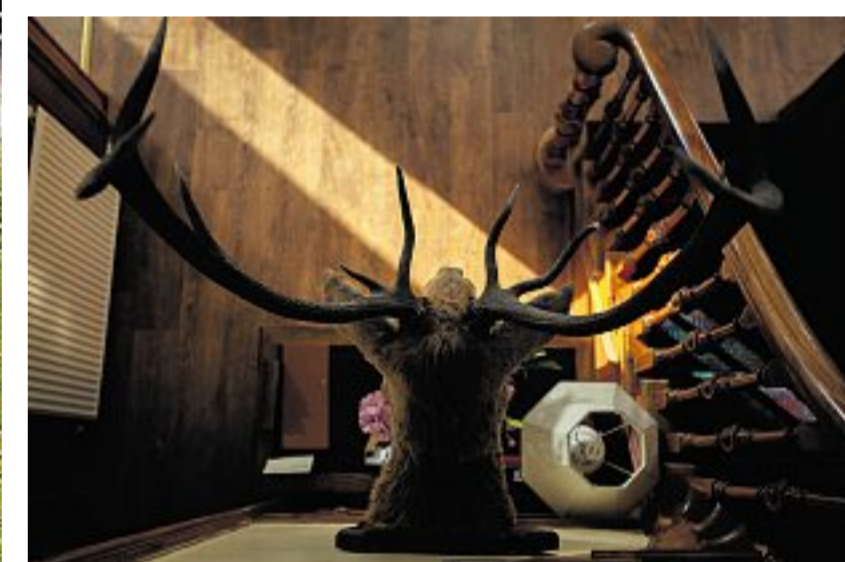
The Art Nouveau guest sitting room is home to two grand sofas, a smattering of tastefully upholstered armchairs and a welcome wood-burning stove. Picture yourself hiking beside the nearby Dee or ski-ing the slopes of Glenshee, imagining an idyllic den to return to with a dram and a blanket. That is precisely what Katy and Julian have created, as if they cracked open the head of an archetypal visitor to Braemar and scooped the idea from within.

But then that Callater Lodge fits so seamlessly into Braemar's tourist landscape comes as no surprise, because its owners are the archetypal visitors. The Fennemas are bike-riding, mountain-climbing, trail-running skiers with a penchant for whisky and a love of their two boundlessly-energetic spaniels – Mac and Finn.

Their guesthouse – although the product of a precise business proposal – is a labour of love. Both Katy and Julian sacrificed prestigious careers in the central belt to decamp to the Cairngorms and embark on a new life together.

Julian is an economist and was the director of teaching at the world-renowned Institute of Petroleum Engineering at Heriot Watt University. A self-described international mongrel, he was born to Dutch parents and has lived across Europe and the Middle East before settling here in the home of the Highland games.

TRAVEL



Julian and Katy Fennema

Katy, on the other hand, has an intimate family connection with Braemar: her grandmother lived there and the village is still home to many of her cousins. An accomplished oboist, she left a 13-year career with the Royal Scottish National Orchestra to set up a new home with her husband.

The inescapable question I had to ask is why? Why have they decided to give up fulfilling livelihoods to risk everything they have on this one, Callater Lodge-shaped, roll of the dice?

Katy, pausing to reflect on all that they have achieved already in six short months, responds: "It's bizarre looking back because, when I came to Braemar as a girl, I had various buildings that I said I would turn into a hotel when I grew up.

"I've always wanted to live like this, far away from big cities. One of my passions is running and I don't want to see

anyone else while I'm out; I love just being in the mountains."

Julian, chipping in, adds: "It's a privilege to come here, let alone make a livelihood here."

Callater Lodge came on the market unexpectedly and presented itself – not unlike the astronomical wonder we stand gazing at from the back garden – as a once-in-a-generation opportunity.

The Fennemas grabbed it with a sense of urgency, and have poured themselves into their new business.

Katy detests the label "boutique hotel" – too much like "gastro pub" – but it's hard to characterise what kind of operation this committed couple are running. Callater Lodge is too small to be considered a hotel, too grand for a B&B and too relaxed to ever be thought of as a country house.

The closest distillation of what the

property at 9 Glenshee Road, Braemar, represents is a home. The day-to-day home of the Fennemas and a home away from home for their guests.

Nothing proves to be too much trouble for our hosts. Walking routes? Katy has several guides inspired by walks her grandmother enjoyed. Dinner reservations? Julian will make them. Fresh home baking in the bedrooms every day? We did not even ask.

The guest book is littered with references to the couple going above and beyond to give their guests a bespoke experience. There is a drying room downstairs for use of visiting walkers. Julian, a keen cyclist, has a veritable workshop to manage running repairs and store bikes. And through the tumultuous ski-ing season, chef Katy laid on supper for bedraggled adventurers.

They even let us sample a dram or three from their own collection of spirits. Perhaps they do this with everyone. Perhaps it was just with us. But the resounding feeling is that every guest is getting special treatment. Take the

eclipse goggles, shipped in from North America. We are the Fennemas' only lodgers this morning, but they've ordered us a pair each so that we can take part in the experience.

The next opportunity Callater Lodge guests will get to see an eclipse from the foothills of the Cairngorms will be in 2026. But do not worry, Katy and Julian will still be there, in their home, ready to hand out the goggles. There is no place they would rather be.

FACT BOX

- Callater Lodge, 9 Glenshee Road, Braemar. Phone 01339 741275, info@callaterlodge.co.uk or visit www.callaterlodge.co.uk.
- This Scottish Tourist Board four-star property has rooms from £40 per person, family room £120, double rooms £90, single room £50. No minimum night stay; breakfast included in price; licensed to serve alcohol; free Wi-Fi; bike storage; drying room; open all year round.

