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REVIEW

100 Princes Street: First In

A plushly discreet arrival with stellar views of Edinburgh Castle.

100 Princes street

ROOMS

30

Reviewed by TOBY GARNER

Why book?

For the plush seclusion of a member's club, with the personal service that Red Carnation hotels are known for—and for just about the best view of Edinburgh Castle.

Set the scene

There's no doorman, so a black "100" flag is the main giveaway that this elegant Princes St townhouse is a haven between the mid-market jewelry shops that flank it. Inside, it's a place of low-lit and low-key velveteen elegance, with 30 discreet rooms over five floors. At The Wallace, a leather-walled lounge and bar area on the 2nd floor, there are vintage globes and oil paintings of tiger fights and steamers on storm-lashed seas. Over a Pentcilla whisky cocktail on a tartan-upholstered chair, I take in unobstructed golden views of the lowering sun hitting Edinburgh Castle—a rare treat, even for locals.

The backstory

Formerly the Edinburgh HQ of the venerable Royal Overseas League member's club, this handsome townhouse was tired and in need of repairs when it was bought in 2020 by Red Carnation—the family-run South African brand with a global portfolio ranging from Botswana's Xigera to Ashford Castle in County Mayo and Hotel 41 in London's Westminster. 100 Princes St was the last hotel purchase by Red Carnation patriarch and serial travel entrepreneur Stanley Tollman, who died in 2021, and its design has been led by his daughter, Toni Tollman. In many ways, she's kept the ethos of the Royal Overseas League intact, fusing a certain old-world clubbiness with oriental styling and auction-bought art suggestive of far-flung (misi)adventure. Most notably, she commissioned the decorative painters Crosford and Saunders to paint a whimsically exotic mural depicting the global explorations of Scottish botanists, which goes all the way up the stairwell. A sense of Enlightenment Edinburgh runs through the place, with much of the upholstery in one of five bespoke tartans by the weaver Araminta Campbell, and a hundred whiskies for private tastings in the Ghillie's Pantry. Due to double as a club with a hundred members, it's part of a broader upscaling of the city's hotel scene—encompassing equivalents like the Balmoral and Glencagles Townhouse, and younger upstarts including the new W Edinburgh, the darkly theatrical House Of Gods and Ennismore's upcoming Hoxton, set for a summer 2024 arrival.

The rooms

Each of the 30 rooms share a certain cocooning tactility—many taking reddish or greenish color schemes from walls covered in one of the hotel's bespoke tartans. All have marble bathrooms, and a similar thematic fusion of the intellectual and the exotic. We stayed in the Isobel, one of the two signature suites with castle views, named after the Arctic explorer Isobel Wylie Hutchison (the slightly larger Archibald is named after the botanist-explorer Archibald Menzies). Velvet green walls envelop a bedroom where the blue-green tartan headboard, bedspread and lampshades are offset by an oil painting of a parrot and a gold lacquer armoire with a bamboo relief. The bathroom's all crisp white marble, with "100"-branded bath products, gowns and slippers. Rooms are scattered with apposite books, like Robert Louis Stevenson's *Edinburgh*, and the "Please Service Room" sign is styled like a kilt-wearer's sporran. The minibar (Lind&Lime gin, Leith Export Co Table Whisky) is hidden in an art deco mirrored cabinet, and the TV disappears into a Chinoiserie-style box at the end of the bed. The only real interruption to this singularly immersive vision comes from the double-decker buses on Princes St, whose upper deck passengers can just about gawp inside.

Food and drink

The Wallace, on the second floor, has the feel of a cozy lounge, with the Ghillie's Pantry just down the corridor, with walls lined with more than 100 whiskies. The food and drink veers towards beautifully executed classics: think Egg's Benedict or a Full Scottish with black pudding and haggis sausages at breakfast, and an excellent three-tier afternoon tea featuring the circular chicken and almond sandwiches based on the home recipe of 90-something Red Carnation matriarch Bea Tollman. There's nothing overly rheffy on the all-day menu by South African Wilhelm Meyer, an alum of Western Cape sister hotel Bushmans Kloof. Instead, it's about tried-and-true comfort food: juicy Aberdeen Angus burgers, lentil cottage pies, lobster rolls and Scottish salmon with asparagus, as well as brand favorites like Beatrice's baked vanilla cheesecake. At the Ghillie's Pantry, whisky tastings are run by former Balmoral whisky ambassador Dario Orisoli, who may be Roman but is soaked in whisky knowledge. More than halfway through a quest to visit a hundred distilleries around the world, his passion for rare 1993 Ebradours or intensely handmade Springbank single malts is infectious, and induces a new appreciation of "uisce beatha" ("water of life" in Gaille). Cocktails tend towards the classics, and some of the complex wines come from the Tollman family's Bouchard Finlayson winery outside Cape Town.

The neighborhood

Princes Street is one of the most iconic streets in the UK, with one of the great city views beyond the Walter Scott Monument and Princes St Gardens up to the Old Town and castle. But it's had a complicated half-century, blighted by questionable post-War architectural decisions (heretical in medieval-Georgian Edinburgh) and the shift to mass-market retail and tacky tourist shops. But in the wake of much local hemming and hawing, and with tourism booming, change might be afoot. With many of the big-brand shops moving to the St James Quarter at the east end of Princes St (next to the W Edinburgh), there's a broad plan for the street to shift towards hotels, restaurants and increased pedestrianization—including an ambitious takeover of the once-iconic Jenners department store by Danish billionaire and rewilding advocate Anders Holch Povlsen. Look beyond the Scottish propensity towards dour complaint, and this could all be a good thing.

The service

This is where 100 Princes St comes into its own, with many of the staff alumni of other Red Carnation hotels, who consider themselves part of the family. Resident manager Laura Jamieson has been with Red Carnation her whole career, most recently at Ireland's Ashford Castle, and the same is true of the chatty Rory McKinnon, who served us afternoon tea. The service is elevated but not robotic, and it's notable that everyone seems to know—and be fond of—the various members of the Tollman family, especially "Mrs T". Staff are also fabulously dressed, in high-necked, ruched blue silk dresses or sharp tartan suits designed by Nicholas Oakwell of No Uniform, who has dressed staff at the Goring, Connaught, Raffles Doha, and many more.

Who comes here?

People who like things done properly: Red Carnation regulars; people who want to immerse in a certain timeless take on Edinburgh. There's room for golf bags downstairs, so for many this may well be the city stop before heading for Muirfield or St Andrews, or perhaps the fly fishing beats to the north.

For families

If this doesn't immediately feel like a family hotel per se, there are kid's menus and interconnecting rooms. And the service levels and intimate size of the hotel are such that staff will be able to organize bespoke experiences for all generations—with resident manager Laura Jamieson eightly talking up the near-infinite possibilities for Harry Potter fans.

Eco effort

Laundry is done every other day, produce is almost entirely locally sourced and silk flowers are part of a general push to reduce waste.

Accessibility

The front steps can be turned into a ramp, and there are two fully wheelchair-adapted rooms on the second floor (on the same level as The Wallace and Ghillie's Pantry), with a wheelchair-friendly lift at the back of the hotel.

Anything else to mention?

There's an impressive list of experiences from the hotel—from fishing on the River Tweed with a bothy lunch to private visits to the atelier of designer Araminta Campbell, with the chance to commission bespoke fabrics. We went on a walking tour with the fabulous, fast-talking Sheila Szatkowski—originally Northern Irish, but in Edinburgh since the early 1970s, and the author of *Enlightenment Edinburgh*. Her bespoke tours are almost as packed with literary allusion, knowledge and oft-grisly intrigue as the city is, but they're also very human: from the Old Town tenements ("medieval Manhattan") that were the original skyscrapers to the narrow close where the original *Encyclopaedia Britannica* was published in 1768, claiming that California might be an island or peninsula in the West Indies. She knows the best times to see Dolly the Sheep at the Museum of Scotland, and how to sneak into the usually off-limits Parliament House, now a grand law chambers with a statue of the controversial lawyer-politician Viscount Melville, who added a delaying clause to the bill abolishing slavery in 1792. As well as every famed Edinburgh author, academic and murderer (of which there are many), she knows where the key scenes from tear-jerking Netflix hit *One Day* were filmed, and can go superfan-deep on Harry Potter, from the origins of Ron Weasley's flying chess pieces to how JK Rowling's knowledge of French and Latin play into names like Voldemort and Malfoy.

Is it worth it? If not for the privacy, the service and the sense of being in your own refined Edinburgh townhouse, then surely for that view.

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