

TURNING off the minor road and on to the Glenapp estate, there's a snaking 1.5km drive up to the castle, along a forested drive. Then suddenly, there it is, out in the open in all its splendour, with crenellations, turrets, towers and the Saltire flag waving its welcome.

Only 5 per cent of Scotland's visitors make it to Ayrshire on the west coast but the remoteness is its blessing – almost deserted seaside towns and lungfuls of fresh Scottish air.

Glenapp Castle is set on the coast in 110 acres of woodland, with sweeping lawns and views of the Irish Sea. It's a small 19th century baronial castle that's quietly been wowing guests for the past ten years.

'You don't happen to come across us or pass us on the road, you must come on purpose so we are a real destination hotel,' says Jill Chalmers, managing director for eight years.

There are plenty of attractive historic hotels with lovely grounds, but they aren't all as special as Glenapp. Social media posts may give a wonderful surface snapshot but dig deeper and many places crumble.

The main difference is the staff, and well-trained staff at that, so small details are taken care of. Over 70 people are employed to make sure your stay is as good as it can be, from gardeners and groundsmen to kitchen porters and trip organisers.

The staff appear content here, and it shows, in both their faces and the figures – turnover is low for hospitality. Many senior managers have been in place for a decade and the head gardener has tended the grounds for 30 years.

It all looks so easy, but there must be a lot of work behind the scenes to make sure all the guests are happy.

Country house hotel doesn't cover it and a few simple touches mark it out as something different, something better – the huge range of fresh flowers in the public areas and every room, a full-time job for the dedicated inhouse florist; the lack of reception desk; proper keys for your room on a leather fob; and the rooms don't have numbers but names.

Plus there's no bar – anything you'd like to drink is brought to you, in the public spaces or in your room. Think of it as the country residence of a distant rich relative.

Despite it being a challenging climate for hospitality, Glenapp seems to be not only surviving, but thriving. It opened another restaurant in May, set in the 19th century glasshouse.

The in-house restaurant is for fine dining, with three AA Rosettes to prove it. But Azalea, a few strides away

through the kitchen garden, fashioned in an original Mackenzie and Moncur Victorian glasshouse, is the second option. Although it's slightly lower key, don't expect the food to be anything but excellent. It's clever ploy – giving guests a choice – and one that appears to be working.

'No matter how great our food is in the castle, guests want a change if they are staying for several days and that's what Azalea does,' Chalmers tells me.

The glasshouse itself is gorgeous, managing to have plenty of space yet being intimate too, with a 100-year-old vine still producing grapes and espaliered apricot and peach trees. There are heaters for cooler days and a real fire.

Food inspiration comes from the kitchen gardens and menus are based around conversations with the head gardener and chefs.

But apart from great food and good service, guests nowadays want something to do. Thankfully, Glenapp has this sorted too.

Most of it is away from tablets, laptops and phones, and features the great outdoors. There are complimentary activities on site, such as croquet, tennis or short walks from the front door, or paid activities, such as a personal falconry display or archery.

Then there are other things to do further afield – in fact, more than 70 well-chosen options.

The trip to visit the Highland cows is something different – not only do you see the animals but you can get up close and groom them. We were taken on a converted tractor trailer and once in the field, we were led to a metal corral, which fenced us in and then the 'coos' came to us for grooming and petting. Having never been this close to a cow – never mind a shaggy-haired Highland 'coo' with huge horns – I found these gentle beasts fascinating.

During our ride in in the trailer, farmer's wife Janet was telling us the cows' history and a bit about their personalities.

When we returned to the farmhouse, a high tea was served, with Janet's home-made cakes. If you do fancy trying it at home, there is a baking book on sale.

It would be hard to beat for an unusual and educating half-day trip, but Glenapp succeeded by taking us out on its own RIB to the local Aisla Craig, an uninhabited island and one of Scotland's largest breeding bird colonies.

Once fitted with life jackets, we had to wait for the tide to come in. The harbour is deliberately shallow, a throwback to smuggling times, when the Royal Navy ships' draft was too deep to get in to chase the smugglers, who had smaller boats.

By the time the tide had risen, the smugglers had offloaded their booty and melted into the night.

Our bumpy ride across to

Glenapp Castle is a wonderfully remote destination hotel that offers a truly special experience



SCOTLAND'S MOST REWARDING DETOUR



BY
OLIVIA GREENWAY

Secluded gem: Clockwise from main, Glenapp Castle; The Highland cows; The hotel's RIB going to Aisla Craig; and one of the lavish bedrooms

the island took about half an hour. It was exhilarating to feel the wind in our hair and taste the salty spray on our lips, though you can sit in the cabin if you prefer not to get drenched.

After a picnic lunch, accompanied by thousands of birds fishing for their young – puffins, guillemots, razorbills and gulls – you can take a short circular walk and imagine what it would have been like to live here, as people did until 1990 when the lighthouse was automated. All that's left now are the granite rocks, exclusively used in Scotland's curling industry.

Back to the castle, the food is mostly local with 60 per cent of dishes supplied by the kitchen garden – some of it walled, and near the Azalea – which guests are welcome to explore. The

kitchen churns its own butter, makes ice-cream and bakes bread.

The pastry chef magics up melt-in-your-mouth biscuits to go with your tea, and petit fours and chocolate truffles to complement your after-dinner coffee.

Fruit cordials are produced in season, for example foraged elderflower with kitchen mint. Lobster is from nearby Ballantrae, and the popular venison loin is shot locally.

The unwritten dress code is smart casual – this is, after all, a place to kick back and enjoy yourself – with maybe more of an effort appreciated at dinner time.

Of course, all this luxury and attention to detail does not come cheap. If you want to push the boat out, book the penthouse, taking over the whole of the top floor,

with four bedrooms (two bedrooms possible), five bathrooms, a butler and a private lift. Lesser mortals will plump for the suites – all different, all larger than standard and none of them with a bad view. It's a special occasion place, a little treat or makes an ideal 'let's take the family' break.

Creating a Scottish paradise is all very well, but potential guests need to know about it. Once they do, they come back.

Featuring in *Amazing Hotels: Life Beyond The Lobby* on BBC2 in September 2023 was a coup for Chalmers and a big boost for the hotel, but it didn't happen by accident. Chalmers spent 'a number of years, off and on' talking to producers.

'I'd say 35 per cent of our guests are now repeat visitors,' Chalmers tells me. It



would appear the word is getting out and this quietly celebrated spot is finally getting the attention it deserves.

TRAVEL FACTS

There are direct flights from Dublin to Glasgow from €38 return, with an 1.5-hour

transfer time. It's a shorter transfer from Glasgow Prestwick, but there are fewer direct flights. If you prefer to hire a car at the airport, parking at Glenapp Castle is complimentary. Glenapp Castle (glenappcastle.com), has B&B doubles from €408.