



It is hoped wild boar will help rotovate top soil.



An eagle population is present on the estate.

WILD THING

Eco-philanthropist Paul Lister purchased his £3.5 million Alladale estate three years ago with a dream of repopulating the Scottish Highlands with indigenous woodland, lynx, wolves and bears. Having opened his doors to guests with a taste for luxury retreats in the wilds, **Phin Foster** spends a weekend at the pleasure of a very different type of laird.

Stalkers could be replaced by wolves in long-term efforts to keep the deer population down.





Alladale Lodge, built in 1877 for an Indian maharaja

In many ways, Paul Lister fits neatly into a long line of landed British eccentrics. Eligible bachelor? Check. Considerable inherited wealth? Check. Large highland estate? Check. Healthy appreciation of the sound of his own voice and an ability to fiercely divide opinion amongst the hoi polloi? Oh check and check again.

He's there to meet us off the plane, a whirlwind of nervous energy in denims, grubby fleece and open flies; dishing out boiled sweets, musing on the sex lives of squirrels and delivering impassioned treatises on the region's socio-economic problems throughout the bouncy 90-minute drive north from Inverness.

Upon arrival at Alladale Lodge, the nerve centre of Lister's 23,000 acres, I've not even had time to dump my bags before the lord of the manor is holding court once more, this time before a roaring log fire in the Laura Ashley-appointed drawing room: 'I've been labelled all sorts of things, but people need to see what's going on here and understand this for what it is. I'm not lining my own pockets; every last penny will be ploughed straight back into the project, but it needs to become sustainable.'

With the estate costing around £2,000 a day to run, Lister's £3.2 million purchase of Alladale in 2003 has never looked like a get rich quick scheme. While his neighbours – 'traditional men with conservative values' – run their estates as private interests in a manner synonymous with the British aristocracy since time immemorial, this landowner is undertaking a project rather larger in scope.

Inspired by the Carpathian mountains in Eastern Europe and South Africa's Shamwari Game Reserve, Lister is looking to regenerate his Highland landscape with acres of Caledonian pine, rowan, birch and other indigenous fauna, lost to centuries of logging and rutting deer, and pave the way for the homecoming of the Big Five to the northern vestiges of the British Isles: boar, lynx, elk, wolf and bear. The plan is to develop a completely self-sustainable wilderness park, a return to the ancient Great Wood of Caledon.

This staggeringly ambitious act of eco-philanthropy has not been met with unanimous approval. Lister, the only son of MFI co-founder Noel – once ranked 20th in the British rich list – needs at least 50,000 acres to sustain two wolf packs and has had trouble getting neighbouring estates to buy into his vision. The scheme also demands a vast perimeter fence, a proposal that has Scottish ramblers up in arms, could see Alladale reclassified as a zoo, barring predator and prey from living side-by-side, and is drawing cynical comparisons with Jurassic Park.

Not a man for paying heed to naysayers, Lister has already brought wild boars and elk onto the estate: 31 of the former, managed in conjunction with Oxford University for a study into topsoil rotovation; and two of the latter, transported from Sweden in the lavatory of a private jet.

Beauty and the beasts

While the project is still in its infancy, nothing can detract from the fearsome natural beauty of Lister's fiefdom. 23,000 acres might not suffice for its owner, but with five glens, two river systems, ten hill lochs and views of the Atlantic to the west and eastwards to the North Sea, the heady mix of scale and seclusion makes for an inimitable holiday destination.

This is a factor that the 2008 Spear's Awards Green Entrepreneur of the year must bank on because, in order to fully realise his vision, the estate needs to attract paying guests. Two eco-cottages will open in early 2009 – one a new build, the other a converted traditional Scottish hunting lodge or 'bothy' – but the jewel in the estate's crown is Alladale Lodge, an elevated Victorian stone-build with sweeping views across the glens, originally erected in 1877 as a hunting retreat for an Indian maharaja.

The house has been restored to its former glories and, with a little help from the aforementioned Laura Ashley, interiors of the eight en-suite bedrooms, drawing room and sumptuous red dining room never fall into the trap of 'tartan theme park', retaining a sense of traditionalism and austerity that would likely curry favour with its earliest owners. The resident chef prepares locally sourced, high-end fare – including

venison shot on the estate – and a highly experienced in-house team, not to mention regular visits from the irrepressibly dour ranger duo, Poppy and Innes, help strike just the right balance between boutique hospitality experience and private country retreat.

The lodge is currently only available for hire by single parties, accommodating up to 14 guests, and the opportunity to play laird, minus the headache of rutting deer and unwelcome poachers, is utterly seductive. Whether its deer stalking, angling, mountain walks, pony trekking or whisky tasting sessions, all traditional Highland pursuits are available on site and the acclaimed Royal Dornoch golf course is only a 20-minute drive away.

There may also be the opportunity to toast a glass or two with Lister, who spends 40 days a year in situ. While his father's passion was yachts – surely that's a more appropriate hobby for the sole heir to a family fortune – the 49-year-old's knowledge and commitment to his philanthropic cause is utterly contagious: 'They hate the idea of wolves?' he asks over dinner, thrusting out his fork for emphasis and coming perilously close to impaling a neighbouring diner. 'Let me tell you something: man's the worst beast of all.'

Until the bears and wolves return to roam the hills, Alladale will still boast one animal certainly worth a visit. ■

Alladale Wilderness Lodge & Reserve's nightly rate starts from £2,300 per night based on 14 sharing. Rate includes full board accommodation and a range of activities such as fly-fishing, deer stalking 4x4 safaris and use of the gym and sauna. For more information and reservations, call 01863 7553338 or visit www.alladale.com.



Photo by Russel Cheyne.

Paul Lister, out and about on his 23,000 acres.

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