

## TRAVEL

# I fell back in love with Scottish town that's become a **spectacular autumn destination**

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If there's one destination in all Scotland where the glorious autumn colours are at their best, it's Perthshire, and the little gem that is Pitlochry is the ideal base for a short break to take it all in. New England move over – we've got autumnal colours every bit as good as yours in our backyard in the shape of the county they call 'Big Tree Country'.

If you still think of Pitlochry as a twee coach holiday destination with tartan tat and outdated tearooms, you need another visit. Year-round this is a visitor's honeypot with some excellent hotels and award-winning restaurants. Add in the distilleries, cosy pubs, impressive family-run cafes, an art gallery and an artisan chocolatier experience and you have the perfect ingredients for a break that will make you proud to be Scottish.

A huge draw every year for visitors in the autumn is The Enchanted Forest which this year is on right now and runs until November 3. This sound and vision extravaganza is a memorable experience. Walking through a forest at night when it is beautifully lit and has atmospheric music is a top tourist attraction, explaining the estimated 85,000 visitors every year.

Luminara is the theme for this year's Enchanted Forest in Faskally Forest, just outside Pitlochry, and it's reached by a complimentary shuttle piece from the town.

They describe the theme as 'a celebration of the unseen connections between nature and technology'. Sounded a bit 'hippy/trippy' to me but it does actually work and it's a delight to stroll through a forest, brought to life by light, music, and storytelling on boards as you go round.

The Enchanted Forest is not the only lights going on in Pitlochry – there's also the Pitlochry Winter Lights – which runs during the dates of The Enchanted Forest and remains on show until the New Year.

Even outwith these dates there are lovely woodland trails. The mature Faskally forest boasts some magnificent old Douglas Fir trees, and let's not forget that the Botanist and Plant Collector David Douglas, who found this species on his North American travels and brought it back to Scotland back in the early 19th century, was a local lad from Scone in Perthshire. A visit costs £27.50 adults, £15 under 18. See [www.enchantedforest.org.uk](http://www.enchantedforest.org.uk)

I can't resist chocolate so it was a given I'd end up at 'Taste Talk' on Pitlochry's High St (and also in Dunkeld). The enthusiastic Gillian and Angus will let you delight in the mouthwatering truffles produced by multi award-winning Highland Chocolatier Ian Burnett (based in Grandtully) which pair remarkably well with a variety of whiskies they offer to



sample. £50 for an hour of sheer pleasure. See <https://tastetalk.co.uk/pitlochry/>

Dispelling the fuddy duddy image of douce Pitlochry further is the range of high octane activities that now take place closeby. 'Nae Limits' is a prime example – with whitewater rafting and for the very brave, bungee jumping too. Pitlochry Theatre is a superb addition to the town. With its varied performances and a half decent restaurant, it's now under the artistic direction of none other than Perthshire-lad Alan Cumming.

I stayed at the recently revamped Four-star Pine Trees Hotel. It offers serious comfort and luxury in a beautiful late 19th century setting with further accommodation in outlying cottages and houses, in addition to the main house. The property has 32 bedrooms and suites (18 in the main

**The Pine Trees Hotel offers a perfect spot to escape the hustle and bustle of city living.**

house) all with beautiful furnishings and beds and bed linens of the very highest quality. Everyone loves a freebie, so enjoy the very thoughtful gifts this hotel offers. These include a complimentary welcome drink; quarter bottle of Edrour whisky, a quarter bottle of The Botanist gin (with posh tonics); chocolate, a selection of Scottish savoury and sweet goodies (always did love that Tunnock's Caramel Log), fresh fruit and fresh milk (soo much better than those tedious little UHT plastic-wrapped portions that splat all over you when you open them). Sorry to all dentists but they even give you a bag of sweets for your journey home – a great way to sweeten the bill.

This hotel is doggie-friendly too. Pooches score with a dog-friendly room in the Coach House, a towel for dirty paws, a goodie bag

full of treats, take-home toy and a tailored walking map designed exclusively for doggie adventures in Pitlochry. Owners can also experience the Fauna menu with your dog in their bar area, with a £50 dining credit to sample the best tastes from the local produce.

A useful touch is the loan of hotel raincoats and wellies from their boot room should you arrive on a 'soft' day. Their dinner cuisine reflects the best of Scottish produce, with beef, lamb, game, seafood, fresh fish – all imaginatively cooked. Forget the mushroom starter but do have the delicious Cullen Skink. With many different categories of rooms and a restaurant worth booking into even if you're not staying, this is the type of place that Scotland is getting renowned for after decades of being the butt of jokes internationally for poor

quality food and accommodation. This is the opposite. Rooms from £235. See [www.pinetreeshotel.co.uk](http://www.pinetreeshotel.co.uk)

I suffer with chronic back pain and it kicked in again on this trip. The Pine Trees doesn't have a spa yet (it's being built) so I took myself off to the lovely Fonab Castle Hotel and had an indulgent, therapeutic treatment called The Ultimate Glow Within – 90 minutes of pure pleasure for face and body. This is another great hotel – five stars this time with a very impressive spa and fine dining restaurant. With rooms of differing categories if you're pushing the boat out this would be the place for you, though it lacks the intimacy of The Pine Trees.

Getting right into Highland mode a distillery had to be on the cards. Dewars in Aberfeldy was the choice as they offer a variety of tastings and a tour. For whisky

**Enchanted Forest is a spectacular sight, and above right, the much-loved Pitlochry**



aficionados try the £60 Whisky Explorer Experience. After a film and self-guided tour of their museum you tour the distillery with a guide and then savour five single malts and blends of different ages. Our guide Tam was a wealth of stories and anecdotes, and the entire experience was enjoyed by all. The incredibly quiet Dutch visitors opened up hugely after a few drams. They have other tastings from £15 upwards.

While in Perthshire I had to stop off at my old favourite from the 30 odd years I spent living in this beautiful part of the world – the classic Sunday run/walk – the village of Dunkeld. It's still gorgeous, but boy, is it busy. Not one car parking space in the village itself and every table in my favourite watering hole was booked – The Perth Arms (thank heavens I'd called ahead). This is the oldest inn in Dunkeld and its home-made food is well known throughout Perthshire. Run by the same family for generations it's a great choice. In addition to favourites like steak pie, fish and chips, mac cheese, the sons of the owners who run the kitchen, produce imaginative dishes like Scottish brown crab with whisky, smoked cheddar and chilli, and venison haunch with chanterelle ragout, oatmeal dumplings and pickled gooseberries. Book ahead!

The pretty National Trust brightly coloured 'little houses' of Dunkeld were built in the early 1700s. Here you also see the Ell Shop featuring the original 'ell' measure, just over a metre long, used for measuring cloth in days gone by. Dunkeld Cathedral dates back to the 1200s and is a wonderfully atmospheric and beautiful church to discover its rich history. Even a one or two's night break in Perthshire at this time of year will recharge the batteries and allow you to enjoy fabulous autumn colours, excellent cuisine and comfortable accommodation. Oh, and a guid dram.