



# Escape Dowans Hotel

An intensive overhaul has turned this Victorian pile in Speyside into a sophisticated and stylish getaway

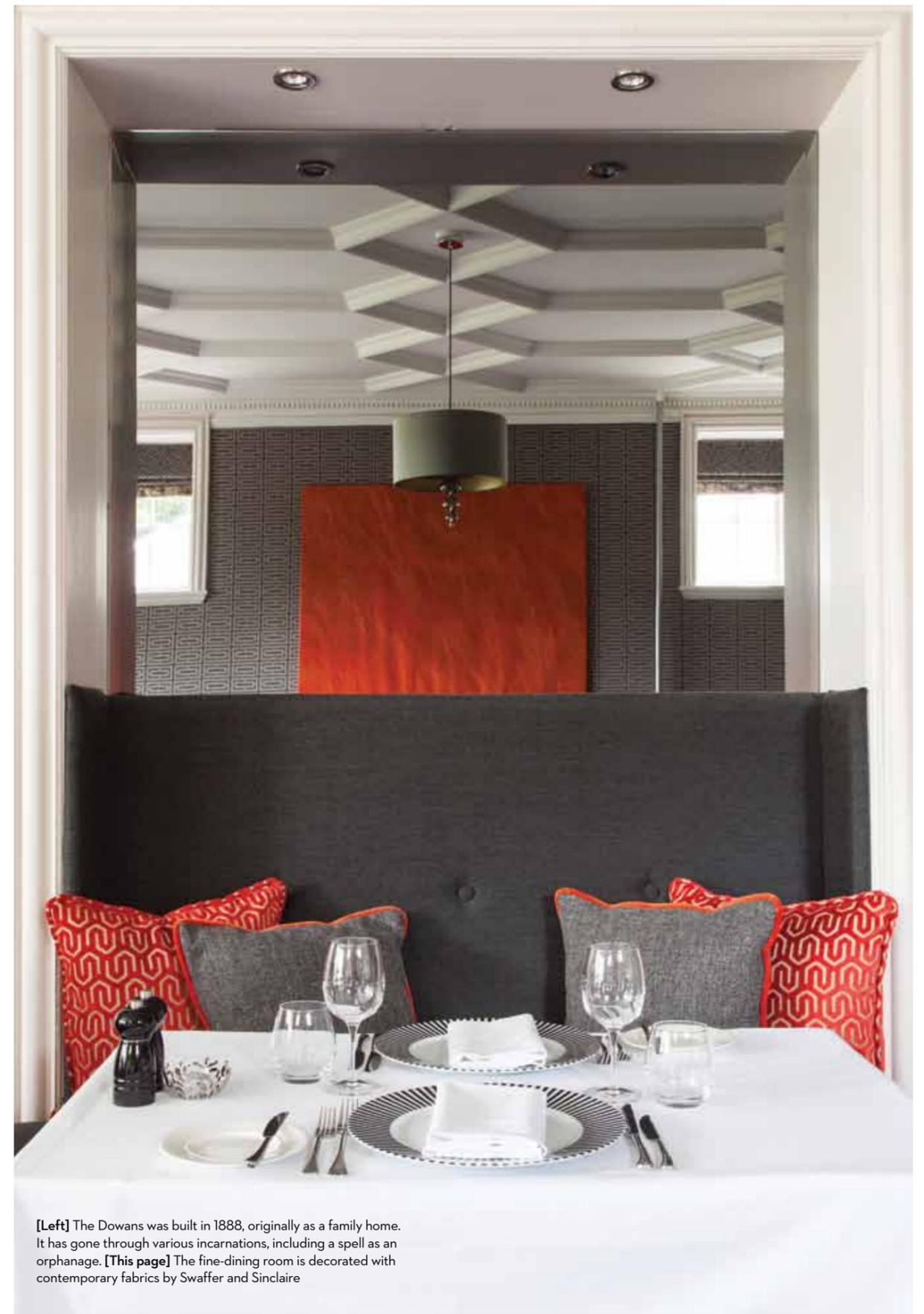
Photography Susie Lowe Words Catherine Coyle

As they embarked upon the refurbishment of their Scots Baronial mansion in Speyside, the Murray family – Marie and Michael and their daughters Steph and Lauren – made some intriguing discoveries. Beneath the layers of paper and paint on the walls they found old nursery scenes and children’s paintings. These, it emerged, were murals that dated from the building’s one-time incarnation as an orphanage. Today, in their place in the bar and restaurant, the interiors are altogether more grown-up and glamorous. The hotel, whose previous owners ran it as a traditional hunting and shooting lodge, now belongs firmly to the 21st century.

With Michael’s career taking him overseas for most of the last thirty years, the family got to know quite a few far-

flung corners of the globe, living at various times in Brazil, Spain, the Philippines and China, among many others. In the process, they gained experience of a wealth of world-class hotels, bars and restaurants, so had plenty of ideas in mind when they took on the overhaul of Aberlour’s established Dowans Hotel.

With the help and advice of Margot Paton, the design director at Glasgow’s Chelsea McLaine Interior Design and a close family friend, the family stripped out and refurbished the Highland property, giving it a refined and cosmopolitan new look. The ambience on a Saturday evening, when locals are in for a drink and residents relax with an aperitif, is that of a sophisticated city venue. There’s no stiff maitre d’ or stuffy dress code, just clusters of people enjoying cocktails in the MBar (a homage to the bar at Hong Kong’s Mandarin ▶



[Left] The Dowans was built in 1888, originally as a family home. It has gone through various incarnations, including a spell as an orphanage. [This page] The fine-dining room is decorated with contemporary fabrics by Swaffer and Sinclair



& Sons, for an understated but opulent touch; in the fine-dining room, Spé, original panelling and cornicing have been freshened up with Designers Guild paint and Sinclaire and Swaffer fabrics to dress chairs and banquettes.

Steph, who cut her teeth at Glasgow's Ubiquitous Chip and One Devonshire Gardens, is the hotel's executive chef, devising the menus and pairing the five-course tasting menu with both wines and whiskies. There is also a less formal menu available in the bistro, 57, where the emphasis is on local and seasonal produce including fish, game and poultry.

In MBar, Lauren runs cocktail masterclasses and games nights to entice locals and entertain guests during their stay. "This place is just like one big house," says Marie, "and we want our guests to feel at home here and to enjoy the relaxed atmosphere." She smiles, adding that she is already planning the next phase of of the hotel's decoration. ■

To book, go to [www.dowanshotel.com](http://www.dowanshotel.com)

Oriental hotel, Marie's favourite) and enthusiasts sampling the vast selection of whiskies on offer in the Still, a custom-built library-cum-whisky snug dedicated to Scotland's biggest export.

Overhauling this place has been a labour of love. Since 2012, when the family bought the hotel following Michael's early retirement, the interior has been upgraded bit by bit, so that the business has been able to remain open throughout. Each of the sixteen bedrooms has a different look, contributing to the 'boutique' feel of the place. Margot has used a neutral backdrop in the bedrooms, with splashes of colour to create identity.

Dowans was once a hang-out for shooting groups and salmon fishermen; now that the clientele has changed, the Murrays wanted the space to reflect that. Zoffany paints on the bedroom walls and textured, tactile fabrics by Osborne & Little, Casamance and Harlequin elevate this spot into something much more sophisticated. The public areas have a luxe individuality about them: the Still features Zoffany heavy wool blinds that have been trimmed in leather from Samuel ▶

## IN THE AREA

This neck of the woods is whisky country, so it's perfect if you're in the mood for a dram.

**Aberlour** distillery, named after the location, 'the mouth of the chattering burn', is within walking distance of Dowans Hotel. There are various tours, designed for both novices and connoisseurs. Just 12 miles away, you'll come to Elgin, home to cashmere specialists **Johnstons of Elgin**. This is where the original mill was located and today's visitors can see behind the scenes where the yarn is dyed and spun before being fashioned into luxury garments. For those seeking some physical exertion, **BikeGlenlivet** takes cyclists on a range of trails through the **Glenlivet Estate** in the Cairngorms National Park.



[Clockwise from top left] The reception area is warm and inviting, with restored panelling finished in smoky tones for maximum impact; the Still is a contemporary take on a private gentlemen's club lounge; one of the nooks in the glamorous MBar; each of the bedrooms has its own identity, with bespoke furniture by Charlotte James and bathrooms by Porcelanosa