

# There's gold in them thar hills

By Adrian Caffery

**I**N Pitlochry they call the police if their garden gnome has blown over in the wind.

Residents also alert the local constabulary if their washing machine breaks down and if the X Factor phoneline is constantly engaged.

That's because even the tiniest of problems seem like emergencies when you live somewhere that's virtually crime free.

The Highland Perthshire town was featured in a recent episode of the warts-and-all, fly-on-the-wall Channel 4 series *Coppers*.

In the programme, a local bobby told a community meeting that they had no reported incidents in a three-month period.

That's right, NO reported crime. "People are aghast at any amount of crime," the officer said to camera.

Another officer, who used to pound the Glasgow beat, added: "Here, everyone gives us a wave – instead of a two-fingered salute!"

There's a kind of community spirit in Pitlochry which must seem pretty strange to the vast majority of us West Midlanders.

It's demonstrated in the pride residents take in the appearance of their town – many times winner of Scotland in Bloom and Britain in Bloom awards.

Pitlochry can also be very proud of the its leading hotel, The Atholl Palace, where my family enjoyed a short break.

With its turrets, carriage porch and landscaped gardens, you'd be forgiven for thinking it was originally home to a Scottish baron.

But it was opened, in 1878, as The Athole Hydro-pathic and run on strict temperance principles to treat convalescents and the infirm.

Its story, and that of the people who built, worked at and visited the hotel, is told in its expansive, basement museum.

The museum, a tourist attraction in its own right, features replicas of medical rooms, servants' bedrooms and the hotel dairy, among others.

Atholl Palace was turned into a conventional hotel after the Second World War but still draws on



Animal magic: A Land Rover tour and (left) panning for gold with Highland Safaris.

major reason for staying there and are perfect for strolling, picnicking and indulging in some leisurely pursuits.

In the grounds there are ponds, a babbling brook, a fountain, well-kept flower beds, a Japanese garden and giant redwoods to

admire.

There's a gentle putting green on the front lawn and a nine-hole pitch and putt a short walk away through woods, where you might spot red squirrels and roe deer.

For the more energetic, there are four all-weather tennis courts, which are the setting for the annual Highland championships, the second oldest tournament in Scotland.

Inside, the four-star hotel has retained many of its Victorian and Art Deco features.

There are 80 bedrooms and romantic suites plus a number of

self-catering options including one-of-a-kind lodges.

The Atholl Palace has a first class reputation for food and flavours are enhanced by the stunning views from the Verandah restaurant along Loch Tummel valley.

Pitlochry's Victorian the town centre, filled with independent shops, and its internationally-renowned Festival Theatre are both within walking distance.

Next to the theatre is the remarkable fish ladder which allows about 6,000 salmon to travel upstream during the breeding season.

The ladder was built in 1952 as part of a hydro-electric power station which involved the creation of Loch Faskally through the damming of the River Tummel.

Three hundred metres long, the ladder consists of 34 separate pools, each 50cm higher than the last and each with an opening one metre below the water level.

There are three larger pools which allow the salmon to rest during their ascent, one of which has a glass wall to allow visitors to see the clever fishies.

And some of them are monsters – the British record salmon, weighing 64 pounds, was caught in these parts.

Just up the A9 from Pitlochry is Blair Castle, Scotland's most visited historic house and the home of the Atholl Highlanders, Europe's only remaining private army.

It's such a classic example of a Scottish castle that it can be seen in miniature in Legoland in Windsor, although it was in need of a lick of paint when we visited.

Nearby, at the foot of a waterfall, is the House of Bruar, Scotland's most prestigious country store, selling quality Scottish knitwear, regional produce and contemporary rural art.

Of course, the area's biggest pull is its dramatic hills, glens and lochs and one popular spot is Queen's View, which overlooks Loch Tummel.

Named after Queen Isabel, wife of Robert the Bruce, the spectacular views as far westwards as the Glen Coe hills were later enjoyed Queen Victoria.

And there's gold in them thar hills!

Highland Safaris, near Aberfeldy, 15 miles from Pitlochry, is the only place in Scotland where you can go panning for gold and semi-precious gemstones.

Armed with a pan and a bucket of dirt, we scooped and swirled away on the 30ft flume, identify-





Blooming lovely: Guests of The Atholl Palace Hotel in Pitlochry can enjoy its stunning gardens, woodland walks and array of sporting activities.

ing our colourful finds with the use of a gem chart.

Whatever you find you get to take home, but the fact I'm still writing for the Birmingham Mail and not lazing in the Bardados sun will tell you I didn't strike it rich.

But there's so much else to do at Highland Safaris that that nobody leaves feeling short-changed.

As the name suggests, you can jump in a 4x4 with a kilted ranger and explore miles of Highland forest and wilderness, up to a height of 3,000ft.

Or you can get behind the wheel of a Land Rover yourself (with an instructor at your side) and go off-road driving on the UK's highest course.

There's also the Red Deer Experience where you can get up close with Britain's largest land mammal, and BikeTRAX, a mountain biking skills loop.

Near to Highland Safaris is Castle Menzies, where Bonnie Prince Charlie stayed on his retreat north from his ill-fated attempt to claim the British throne in 1745.

And in Aberfeldy town is Dewars, a traditional working distillery with a visitor centre rated by Whisky Magazine as "the ultimate".

Visitors are taken on an interactive journey through the Dewars story, then on a guided tour of the distillery with a few drams in the tasting bar.

But drivers be warned: With little else to distract them, the local police are bound to be pretty on hot drink drivers!



Leap of faith: The ingenious Fish Ladder in Pitlochry.



Lotta bottle: A display at Dewars's World of Whisky.

## Getting There

The Atholl Palace is currently offering a 'Highland Explorers' deal – two nights for £129pp including bed and breakfast and entry to Blair Castle; the Red Deer Park at Highland Safaris and the hotel's own museum. Another deal is four nights for the price of three – £249pp. Or stay three nights before May 11 and get two rounds at Pitlochry Golf Course free. More offers, including spa deals, are advertised on the website [www.athollpalace.com](http://www.athollpalace.com). For more details on Highland Safaris visit [www.highlandsafaris.net](http://www.highlandsafaris.net). And for more on Dewars's World of Whisky visit [www.dewars.com](http://www.dewars.com)