

British hotels

Cromlix House

In the court of Kim and Andy



The Murrays have served up a triumph with this beautifully refurbished hotel, says Fiona Duncan

I have always been hopeless at flower arranging. At least, that's what I thought until Kim Murray, wife of Andy, put me right at her gorgeous Scottish hotel. "You are a professional, right?" she asked me as she surveyed my haphazard but apparently successful creation during her masterclass.

What a compliment, but my triumph was purely down to my teacher. Passionate about growing and displaying flowers at her Surrey home as well as hand-tied gifts for her friends, Kim has a relaxed teaching style that matches her relaxed style of floristry: "First, I rampage through the garden with a pair of secateurs. Then I start with something structural, like a rose, and surround it with wafty stuff, not forgetting to add in a few taller stems."

Kim may have zero formal training as a florist, but what she does have is an eye, in the same way that she has an eye for what is wanted from a country-house hotel these days. The natural arrangements of garden flowers at Cromlix, and the cuttings garden that she is creating with brilliant head gardener Sarah Janisch Corser, are both expressions of the current zeitgeist and part of the many changes that have swept through Cromlix since the Murrays decided to take over the management of their hotel themselves, reopening it earlier this year.

Andy Murray, son of Dunblane, bought Cromlix House in 2013. A hotel since the 1980s, this plain Victorian mansion with its own ornate chapel was where locals, including the Murray family, would come for special occasions. Jamie Murray married here in 2010, not long before the hotel, having fallen on hard times, shut its doors.

Being rather busy with tennis and the swift arrival of four children since they married in 2015, Andy and Kim brought in a management company to run Cromlix. But as I warned at the time, management companies provide no soul and after 10 years, the Murrays felt detached enough to sell the place. Until, that is, a canny consultant advised Kim that she had an opportunity to do something special and make Cromlix hers. And she has.

In the hotel industry, amateurs with no experience can often be far more



◀ 'Spectacular': the bar is just one expression of how the Murrays have made Cromlix House their own

▶ Kim Murray, right, with Fiona Duncan after their floristry masterclass



successful than professionals. From the moment I saw the new weathered steel sign at the entrance to Cromlix, set in 35-acre grounds, including a lake, I knew I was in for a treat. Kim has partnered with Belfast interior designer Suzanne Garuda, with whom she has recently worked on her own Surrey home, to create something dramatic, floral, artistic, individual and – crucially – comfortable. I can't think of another hotel that has undergone a top-

toe makeover twice in a decade from the same owners, but as I wandered from the elegant drawing room to the spectacular bar, to the fresh and lovely bedrooms, detecting the influence of the Fife Arms and Beaverbrook as I went, I knew this was the only way the Murrays could reclaim their acquisition. Instead of the previous smart-but-static incarnation, it is now a relaxed and warmly welcoming hotel of which they can be proud.

"Everything has changed," says new general manager Barry Makin. "Now we can be much nimbler, responding to guests and how they would like to spend their time with us." As well as flower arranging (usually with Sarah, not Kim), I spent an hour with forager and herbalist Lauren Lochrie in the wooded, tranquil grounds, and another hour blending my own essential oil skin creams from her recipe. You can do falconry and archery too, and play tennis, including coaching sessions, on Andy's court done out in Wimbledon colours.

CROMLIX HOUSE
Dunblane
9/10

Cromlix, Kinbuck,
Stirlingshire FK15 9JT
01786 820310
cromlix.com

Darin Campbell, also a forager, has been head chef at Cromlix for 10 years, from the time when the restaurant was a Roux Brothers concession. Food in the airy Glasshouse is now fresh, delicate and, like the hotel, scattered with flowers. I won't forget his chocolate delight.

Who knew that Andy Murray was a serious ("very", says Kim) collector of art? As well as pictures on loan from the Royal Scottish Academy, works from his own collection now grace the walls, including pieces by David Shrigley and Damien Hurst. They have helped transform this place into something exciting, though not – in my view regretfully – Scottish; even the stags' heads in the theatrical billiard room look like pastiche, when in fact they have been there for ever. Still, the garden and hedgerow flowers, instead of those dreadful lily arrangements of old, are a welcome sign of our times.

Double rooms cost from £335, B&B.

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In terms of attractions, the pretty shops and tearooms of Grasmere village are just a 10-minute walk away – but stroll a little further and you will discover Dove Cottage, the former home of poet William Wordsworth. Telegraph Travel writer Helen Pickles says: "The hotel offers a restful stay if you want to be close to a pretty village without being in the tourist hubbub."

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Harriet O'Brien, Telegraph Travel writer, says: "This beautifully positioned old house has a picturesque garden, first-class restaurant and tremendous outlook."

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SAVE UP TO
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Natalie Millar-Partridge, Telegraph Travel writer, says: "This welcoming retreat is the ideal base from which to explore the Cornish coastline. Lodges are light-filled and spacious. The friendly team is passionate about all that the site offers."

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A terrace for warm days, open fires for cold days – this reinvented pub in Helmsley is idyllic year round. In the spa, choose from a facial, foot and leg energiser, or outer glow body exfoliation. Enjoy easy access to North York Moors.

Helen Pickles, Telegraph Travel writer, says: "A smart yet relaxed hotel with accomplished cuisine in one of North Yorkshire's prettiest market towns."

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