

Smash hit or code violation for new-look Cromlix House?

The tennis superstar and his wife, Kim Sears, have given their hotel a vibrant new look. But will the locals approve? We sent **Selena Barr** into the rolling hills above Dunblane to find out

Cromlix House regulars held their breath when Andy Murray bought the hotel in 2013. What would Murray do to their baby? They needn't have worried. OK, the restaurant and bar were given a modern makeover,

but otherwise things stayed pretty much the same. Tartan carpets, tweed sofas, Highland watercolours — the former Victorian manse was still a traditional country house hotel.

Boy, has that changed. In January Murray's wife, Kim Sears, took control. Out went ICM group, the hotel management group brought in to run things in 2014, in came Sears and the interior designer Suzanne Garuda. The results? My family and I headed into the rolling hills above Dunblane to find out.

Pulling up outside the turreted grey-stone house, we were greeted by the new general manager, Barry Makin, previously at the Scotsman in Edinburgh. My young daughters — plus dog — immediately went feral on the 34-acre lawns, gardens and Victorian woodland.

As well as an immaculate tennis court there's an Instagram-worthy swing and a mile-long drive — ideal for children riding bikes (we brought our own). There's a magical wee loch reached by a rhododendron-lined trail in a secluded, enchanting glade that's home to swans, coots and frogs. Over on the more formal lawn we found croquet and giant chess, plus other children for my daughters to play with while I unwound with a preprandial cocktail in the bar. This has been redesigned in bold botanical style, with striking wallpaper, pink velvet and bottle-green leather booths.

The Glasshouse restaurant is a 50-cover conservatory with an open kitchen and verdant theme. While the new-look decor is certainly attractive, I felt I could have been dining anywhere in Europe. Previously overseen by the Chez Roux group, with French classical cuisine to the fore, the restaurant now marries local produce with fragrant Asian flavours, but is still headed by the local star Darin Campbell, formerly head chef at two Michelin-star Andrew Fairlie at Gleneagles.

The revamp is similarly extensive in the rooms, all now popping with colour and eye-catching art and named after local flowers and herbs. Our suite, Tulip, had a rollout bath and indulgent bubbles by the Stockbridge-based artisan skincare brand MODM. Clean and robed, the girls continued their never-ending snack quest by grazing on homemade shortbread made to Andy's grandmother's secret recipe.

Next morning we were back out exploring. I had planned to jump in the car and visit local attractions such as Stirling Castle and Gleneagles, but



The Cromlix House makeover was driven by Kim Sears, above, who has added artworks from the family's own collection, including works by David Shrigley

there is plenty on site to entertain a family for a weekend. In the afternoon we hid from the rain in front of the fire in the drawing room. The pastel-hued floral-themed room is primarily used for afternoon tea. It is a symphony of teal, duck egg blue and coral. As well as Sears buying new furniture, many of the tired old chairs have been reupholstered, and original details such as the brass light sconces have been retained.

Another standout public space is the foyer between the private dining room and the bar. Here you'll find art by David Shrigley and Damien Hirst

hanging on Farrow & Ball Radicchio walls. And there's a new grand piano.

Upstairs, the billiard room — it's Murray's favourite room — has a full-size electric-blue-topped billiard table, bottomless pick'n'mix (argh!), board games and three ancient-looking red stag mounts. But what makes Cromlix truly unique is its tiny private chapel, which seats just 36 guests. It's where Murray's brother, Jamie tied the knot.

Built in 1874, Cromlix is undeniably Scottish from the outside. Inside, the new finish is chic and upmarket — but is it Scottish? There was a time when almost all country house hotels

in Scotland followed the same interior design rules. Tartan curtains were top of the list, and there was always a nod to thistles, heather, tweed and Highland coos somewhere. This look may now be outdated, but Cromlix has swapped this style with parrots and pineapples. It's a London members' club look, which I don't dislike, but I do wonder what the Dunblane regulars are saying. Either way, I know where I'll be going if I ever get around to renewing my vows. *Selena Barr was a guest of Cromlix House (cromlix.com). B&B doubles from £110*

COVER AND BELOW: VERENA SPLETT



Coast with the most? Head to this chic new Menorcan hotel

Villa Le Blanc Gran Melia is beautiful and sustainable — and just wait until you see the views. By **Sara Darling**

I have veered between the tropics and the desert in search of autumn sun, so when I got the chance to check out the Melia hotel chain's first premium portfolio hotel on Menorca, it was an instant "vamos!" from me. Three hours from Edinburgh, the Balearic island averages a just-right 24C in October, when its beaches and bars are joyously free of summer's crowds. I packed my Havaianas and flew south, reaching Villa Le Blanc Gran Melia in time for dinner.

Driving into the sunset, with no hotel skylines to hamper the view, my first glimpse of the hotel's calming whitewashed walls set the scene of sophisticated serenity. Opened last summer, the newest property in the brand's portfolio has been thoughtfully designed to create an oasis of calm, with the added bonus of an adults-only rooftop pool and direct access to Santo Tomas beach.

My room came with a spacious glass-fronted balcony overlooking the pool and beach. Yes, it was in waving distance of the holidaymakers in the facing apartments; no, it did not deter me from trying out my private balcony whirlpool bath. More modest bathers will have to satisfy themselves with the in-room tub and wetroom with two waterfall showers (and a bed that's large enough for four).

Designed by the architect Alvaro Sans, the hotel makes the most of Menorca's sunlight and its beachside location to create his version of a traditional Mediterranean finca. It has a neutral palette, with stone archways and porches merging the inside and outside. In fact, the hotel is effectively one large porch — open to the elements, it provides an Insta-tastic backdrop of shimmering sea. Staff uniforms (white linen, natch) co-ordinate with the tasteful decor.

Boasting sustainable materials throughout, the property is not overly preachy. There are glass bottles for the toiletries and no straws or plastic, but the eco credentials are mainly behind the



Villa Le Blanc Gran Melia is a peaceful and eco-conscious haven with direct access to Santo Tomas beach, top. Guests at the Gran Melia can easily make for the Cami de Cavalls hiking trail, below, which links all of Menorca's beaches

scenes, with biomass boilers and photovoltaic solar panels to boost green energy. Guests are encouraged to use the hotel app to save on paper.

With the cleanest sea in the western Mediterranean, it's no wonder that the hotel's beach-facing S'Amarador restaurant serves great seafood, with a mouthwatering lobster stew (or caldereta de langosta, Menorca's signature dish), excellent paella and a showstopping seafood bisque. Breakfast comes with a side order of classical cello to soothe you into another day in paradise; the all-day Nivi diner has pizzas, salads and snacks for those without bottomless pockets.

The hotel hides a myriad of nooks and crannies, all worth exploring. These house contemporary art, a boutique, manicured gardens with

plentiful loungers, a secluded adults-only rooftop pool and a cool-jet spa bath. It also has a spa with an indoor pool, steam room and sauna.

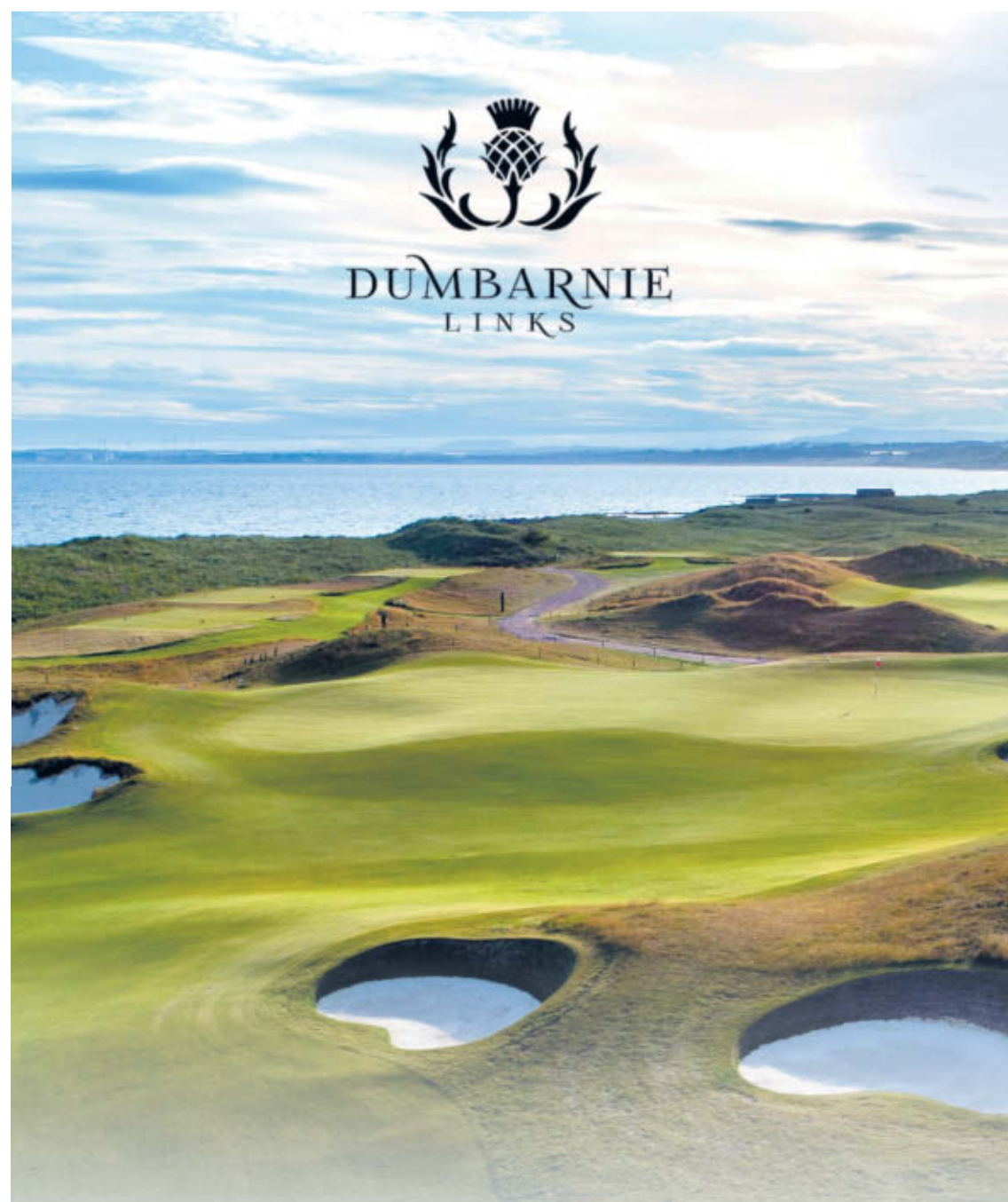
The hotel is at the centre of Menorca's southern coast, which meant that I could join the Cami de Cavalls trail, which links the island's beaches. It took me to Santo Tomas and Playa San Aedeato, which offer warm, sparkling water and white sands. The best break from the sunlounger for me, though, was Isla del Rey. The tiny islet is easily accessible by taxi boat from the harbour, but Villa Le Blanc can organise private transfers. Less than 280m across at its widest point, Isla del Rey is home to a former naval hospital museum. In 2021 the art world's power couple Hauser & Wirth opened a modern-art gallery in one of the 18th-century outbuildings; it's worth a visit for the gardens and alfresco cantina alone.

Back on Menorca I treated myself to a sunset boat trip from the hotel on a traditional wooden llaut. I've been on boats from Mexico to the Maldives, but nothing has beaten the sound of the sea that night as the amber sun gleamed above. "Long way from Scotland, no?" the captain joked. A long way indeed.



Need to know

Sara Darling was a guest of Melia Hotels, which has B&B doubles at Villa le Blanc Gran Melia from £205 (melia.com). Fly to Menorca from Edinburgh or Glasgow from £265 return (jet2.com)



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5
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Kids' days
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Landmark Park, Carrbridge

The go-to Cairngorms family outdoor activity centre, with much to throw yourself into, audio-visual displays and shopping. Great for kids messing about in the woods, on slides, in a maze etc. Plus, the Wildwater Coaster. Fire Tower may be too much for Granny, but there are fine forest views. £35 adult, £33 child; landmarkpark.co.uk

Craigtoun Park, St Andrews

Two miles south west of St Andrews on the Pitscottie Road. An oasis of fun: bouncy castles, trampolines, crazy golf, boating lake, a train through the grounds, adventure playgrounds and glasshouses — and, added in 2022, a go-kart track for older children. Also a 30ft zip wire. Day pass £9.50; friendsofcraigtoun.org.uk

Bowhill, near Selkirk

Bowhill House and estate, though not offering itself as a kids' "attraction", is a lovely place for family walking, messing about and, particularly at this time of year, finding mushrooms. Adventure playground, world-class art collection in the 19th-century house. House: £14 adult, £7 child; grounds and playground: £7 adult, £5 child; bowhillhouse.co.uk

Macduff Marine Aquarium

On the seafloor east of Macduff harbour, a family attraction for this Moray Firth port. Touch pool sessions and feeding shows, plus guided rockpool rambles. All fish seem curiously happy with their lot, content to educate and entertain. £8.60 adult, £3.45 child aged 3-4, £5.20 child aged 5-15; macduff-aquarium.org.uk

Edinburgh Zoo

Long-venerated, always-evolving landmark where the natural world, from the poles to the plains of Africa, is ranged around Corstorphine Hill. Enough huge, exotic or ghastly creatures, and friendly, amusing ones, to fill a day full of stimulation. £24.75 adult, £15.70 child; edinburghzoo.org.uk Taken from **Scotland the Best** by Peter Irvine