



HUT OF DREAMS: Straloch Estate in Perthshire offers chef-cooked wild picnics in its 'hut of dreams' and at other spots around this Highland idyll.



Toby enjoys the stroll to the lunch hut.



A spot of rowing and fly fishing after lunch.

PICNICS TASTE BETTER WILD

OUT AND ABOUT

with Gayle Ritchie



Gayle explores stunning Straloch in Perthshire and enjoys a wild picnic in the estate's remote 'hut of dreams'



Gayle and estate owner Lucy Holt with their Highland feast.

A wild picnic in a remote wooden hut boasting magnificent panoramic views of the Perthshire hills?

A private wildlife walk, a chance to go fishing, row a boat on a loch and maybe even have a wee swim? How could I possibly refuse!

Driving into idyllic Straloch last Friday with my dog, Toby, I'm bursting with excitement at the prospect of the afternoon ahead.

After meeting the estate's super-friendly owners, Lucy and Will Holt, and their two gorgeous Labradors, we decide on a plan of action: Lucy and I will walk with the dogs to the lunch hut, while Will will meet us there and ferry us back in his Land Rover. Perfect.

Straloch, for those who don't know it, is one of Scotland's most stunning and little-known estates, tucked up in a pretty glen on the southern fringe of the Cairngorms National Park.

With miles of rugged heather hills and mountains to the north, and the gently rolling pastures and wooded hills of Strathardle glen to the south, it's a nature lover's paradise.

And while it feels wonderfully remote, the 3,000-acre estate is a mere 15-minute drive to Pitlochry.

The yomp to the hut takes around an hour, says Lucy, and within a few minutes of strolling, we reach a meadow filled with colourful wildflowers – orchids, rock rose,

eyebright, and sundew, which traps insects with its sticky tentacles.

The flowers have popped up in abundance since the estate created conservation meadows by limiting the grazing for cattle.

"It's brilliant because they attract butterflies and all sorts of invertebrates," says Lucy. "Rock rose is profuse here and it's the only flower the locally-rare northern brown argus butterfly relies upon."

Straloch is lucky to have four types of the "fragrant" variety, which gives off a gorgeous scent.

As we stroll, we spot a buzzard, and Lucy tells me the hills are home to hen harriers, owls, merlin, grouse and peregrine falcon.

"Being right on the edge of mountain wilderness, we get such a diverse range of wildlife," she muses, peering through binoculars at a herd of red deer.

The curiously-named Witch's Stone, complete with a miniature Scots Pine growing out of it, soon comes into view. A glacial "erratic", which has been transported by a glacier and deposited here, geologists reckon it's come from Aberdeenshire.

There's a magical feel to it, and it's no surprise to discover there's a legend associated with this strange formation.

"Apparently many thousands of years ago, a witch was commissioned to build a castle at the top of a crag here," smiles Lucy.

"She was flying back on her broomstick with a boulder in her apron when a poacher looked up, crossed himself and caused her to briefly lose her magic powers and drop the stone. Glacial erratic or witch's stone? Up to you!"

Scattered throughout the glen are remnants of old settlements, or "ferm touns", and the enclosures where inhabitants would've kept their animals. These may have been abandoned at the end of the 19th Century, possibly during the Highland Clearances.

Meandering along the hill path, Lucy points out a cute riverbank fishing bothy soon to be turned into glamping accommodation complete with sauna. That'll be fun!

Around 10 minutes from the hut, we hear the distant rumble of a vehicle. It's Penny Kemish, Lucy's "right-hand woman" – the estate's resident chef and housekeeper, and the person responsible for creating the sumptuous wild picnics.

My jaw drops when I spot the hut – just wow! Sitting slap bang in the middle of nowhere, it oozes rugged charm and beauty.

It's the epitome of Highland hygge, festooned with furry rugs, cosy throws, twinkling fairy lights, candles and log fire, while the huge centrepiece trestle table groans with freshly prepared dishes.

"Welcome to the hut of dreams!" exclaims Will, greeting us inside and cracking open a bottle of champagne.

One thing is guaranteed – we're not going to go hungry. There are pies, salads, quiches, meats, fish dishes, artisan breads, a terrifically tasty cheese, poppyseed and paprika shortbread... and to round it all off, pots of cranachan.

I wolf down as much as my belly will allow, but I'm relieved when Will suggests I take home any leftovers in a doggy bag. Phew.

I'm reluctant to leave this special spot, but I'm glad to be getting a lift back in the Landy.

Over coffee, Lucy suggests we go fly fishing in the nearby tranquil loch. I'm happy to have a bash, but equally delighted to simply row the boat and sit back and relax, watching Lucy as she casts. Neither of us catches anything, but no matter – it's fun trying.

Before I head off, Lucy gifts me a carton of free-range eggs laid by her hens and shows me one of her favourite river swim spots.

Because the sun is shining and I'm feeling very summery, I'm determined to take a dip. Typically, the heavens open, but I get in and splash around anyway. Very refreshing and a wonderful way to round off a fantastic afternoon!

Other wild picnic spots on Straloch Estate include the jetty, the island and the walled garden. Contact Penny to book at penny@straloch.com or call 07920 062809. For more details see straloch.com