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Left: A guest takes in the stunning Cumbrian scenery from the outdoor pool at The Falls Spa



Lakeside luxury

We visit The Falls Spa at Lodore Falls Hotel, in Cumbria, to discover what the Lake District's latest multi-million-pound spa has to offer

REPORT BY IAN PARKES

From its breathtaking location at the foot of the waterfall from which it takes its name, the Lodore Falls Hotel offers stunning views across Derwent Water, the Skiddaw mountain range and Catbells fell. With a near 150-year history, the former inn, which was converted in 1870, has gained iconic status in Cumbria, having been patronised by royalty, including King Edward VII and Prince Arthur, the third son of Queen Victoria, as well as famous names including Colonel 'Buffalo Bill' Cody, who once signed the guest register while touring with his Wild West show.

For 40 years, from 1947 to 1987, Lodore Falls gained prominence under the ownership of Robert and Merthie England, prior to being taken on by the Stakis Hotel Group, and then the Hilton (UK & Ireland) Group, before being purchased by Charles and Kit Graves in 2004. Renowned local hoteliers who, along with their daughter Daniella Hope, run a further five properties in the area under the Lake District Hotels banner, the Graves have taken a bold step in adding a touch of

21st-century modernity to the property.

The waterfalls and river now divide the main 73-room hotel on one side and The Falls Spa and 14 suites on the other. The latter are the cornerstone of an £11 million (€12.3 million) redevelopment, overseen architecturally by Carlisle-based Unwin Jones Partnership, and constructed by Thomas Armstrong (Holdings) Ltd, of Maryport, Cumbria.

"The Lodore is an old building that has been built on over the years," says general manager Matt Collins, whose father worked at the property in the mid-1980s. "Mr and Mrs England made a statement when they ran it, and they were quite forward for their time.

"For the Graves this is a statement of their belief that there is a market for this type of environment. My view is that it is their legacy; they have brought the hotel into this century. They're also good at making things work. They're good at business and understanding where the market is, where it's going to be in the next two to three years, and making things happen."

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Matt Collins General manager

Delivering a homely feel

The main hotel still displays a warm, traditional charm with a modern feel thanks to the addition of an inviting conservatory and pan-Asian fusion restaurant, Mizu. Across the river is the 1,074sqm Falls Spa and the sumptuously appointed suites that provide a genuine homely feel thanks to their Scandinavian-style décor, which echoes Kit Graves' Danish heritage. ▶



▷ With consultancy by Commercial Spa Strategies' Liz Holmes and interior design by Scotland's Greylane, the spa offers a smooth-flowing hydro-thermal journey that curves in an arc around a central 'courtyard' area, which includes an ice fountain, padded loungers and heated mosaic loungers. An enticing Champagne bar is positioned off to the side. The suite itself provides a laconium, a forest rinse shower, a salt steam room, a tropical rain experience, a eucalyptus/menthol aroma steam room, a 'thermal sensation' with Kneipp therapy massage water jets and a glass-fronted herbal sauna.

Explaining the indoor experience, which enjoys panoramic views of the lake and mountains, Holmes says: "We know this is a challenging market for therapist recruitment and decided to ensure the wet spa area was a product in itself and just as important to the revenue as the treatment rooms.

"The interior wet spa journey takes the guest from the warming laconium through the salt, steam

"The business model we have drawn up ensures guests receive the access they prefer, while allowing us to control the numbers within the spa throughout the day."

Davina Hassell Spa manager



Clockwise from above left: La Sultane de Saba's Akwaterra massage utilises ergonomic warm ceramics; a social gathering in the Champagne bar; the spa's 16m infinity-edge vitality pool is one of the largest in the UK

and sauna to gradually increase body temperature. There are also six heated loungers and an experience shower for use between rooms. The curved design of the salt and steam room provide enhanced levels of comfort and space, quite unlike the standard square rooms guests often expect."

Stepping outside, the spa's centrepiece is a 16m infinity-edge vitality pool, understood to be one of the largest outdoor pools of its type in the UK, complete with swan-neck jets and three different types of hydrotherapy experiences. There is also an additional sauna affording magnificent views, and a cold-water drench bucket.

"The outdoor experiences are among the best anywhere," adds Holmes. "Apart from the beautiful lakeside view, there is a real understanding that this is the place guests want to be as part of their spa break. It is memorable in itself and designed to inspire visitors as a key experience.

"We expect the pool to become a year-round attraction with its heated deck and cosy blankets as required.

Service of drinks will come from the Champagne bar at poolside to enhance spa packages and encourage dwell time and secondary spend." ▷

From top right: With its heated deck, the outdoor pool is expected to be a favourite with guests throughout the year; the spa's sumptuous relaxation lounge; a luxurious, curved salt steam room features in the thermal suite

▷ **The best of two worlds**

Throughout the five treatment rooms, a carefully curated spa menu offers a range of rituals from Elemis, primarily for facials, along with French brand La Sultane de Saba for the body, including the latter's Akwaterra massage that incorporates warmed, ergonomic, ceramic tools.

"The treatment rooms are stunning and spacious," says Holmes. "Treatment quality and development reflects these premium products and these engage with guests' reasons for being in the Lake District – wellbeing, relaxation and celebration are all on offer at The Falls Spa."

Explaining the decisions behind the selection of the brands, spa manager Davina Hassell adds: "We chose Elemis because it is such a well-known brand. They work with us and offer such excellent support.

"I have always liked working with smaller brands too, so I'm glad Liz and the owners selected Sultane de Saba, which is more bespoke. In my opinion, the two brands work together very well, there is no clash.

"With regards to treatments and spa days, we've tried to keep our pricing structure simple, with prices set dependent on treatment duration. It makes our financial forecasting simple to calculate. With special offers, we always try to incorporate spa access and create a package so we don't discount on treatments, protecting our hourly treatment income that goes towards therapist costs."

A careful balance

While guests staying in the hotel's spa suites receive complimentary, unlimited access to the spa, those in other room categories have the choice of a four-hour time slot throughout the day and evening at a cost of £25 per person.

Hassell admits that planning the operational structure of the spa was a challenge, in particular, gauging the number of guests within the thermal suite at any one time, and how many could be comfortably accommodated per time slot.

"With 12 heat experiences there are plenty of areas for our guests to enjoy, but you are always aware of the favoured 'sweet spots', so you have to avoid overcrowding," she explains. "Over time we will be able to see the trends and make changes accordingly. For now, the business model we have drawn up ensures guests receive the access they prefer, while allowing us to control the numbers within the spa throughout the day, so safeguarding their enjoyment. ▷



"We know this is a challenging market for therapist recruitment and decided to ensure the wet spa area was a product in itself and just as important to the revenue as the treatment rooms."

Liz Holmes Commercial Spa Strategies



Spa The Falls Spa, Lodore Falls Hotel, UK



Clockwise from top: Heated mosaic loungers in the 'courtyard' area at the centre of the thermal journey; a cold water drench bucket offers a refreshing outdoor experience; Life Fitness equipment in the spa's gym

▷

“And when the spa is not full with residents, we can increase numbers via spa packages, most of which include a treatment or mud rasul. In return, these spa days contribute to the food and beverage income as either a two-course lunch or afternoon tea is included on most occasions.”

Lodore Falls has opted not to offer membership packages at present as the spa has primarily been built to enhance the experience for new and existing guests, offering a degree of exclusivity.

“There should be a feeling of calm and luxury, not an over-run spa with hundreds of members,” explains Collins. “It was also hoped that the combination of the new spa and the adjoining spa suite bedrooms would work hand in hand, providing a new facility for previous guests, but also appealing to a new and wider market.”

“The spa is an integrated part of the overall hotel offering, which in return will increase occupancy, as well as food and drink revenue streams.”

Lodore Falls faces strong competition in the area, and while Collins makes clear that the Graves family are eager to reap a return “as soon as possible”, he is equally keen to point

out that the redevelopment work was carried out on solid financial foundations.

“One of the reasons I’m proud of working for the company is that we don’t borrow money,” he says. “Everything we make in the hotel is reinvested. Ultimately, it is the culmination of all the properties over the years performing really well and hitting their margins that has allowed us to do a project like this.”

“As a hotelier, the spa is a facility to help fill my rooms. If I do, I will get the return back quicker. But the spa itself will not generate enough on its own. It’s going to take the packages, the Mizu restaurant, the F&B offering, so people come for a two or three-night stay and use all the different facilities. All the little add-ons are how we’re going to get that return.”

“Overall, what I can say is, the Graves wanted something to compete with the best in the Lake District, and they certainly have achieved that.” ●●●●●

THE FALLS SPA, LODORE FALLS HOTEL

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Owner: Charles and Kit Graves **Investment:** £11 million

Spa size: 1,074sqm **Spa team:** 14 **Treatment rooms:** Five **Spa suites:** 14

Product partners: Elemis, Sultane de Saba **Thermal and wet spa design and supply:** Rigo Spa **Other suppliers:** Ellisons (Living Earth Crafts), Life Fitness, BC Softwear, Gantner