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**New operator and multi-million pound investment announced for Cairngorm Mountain**

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HIE will continue to own Cairngorm Estate, including the funicular and associated infrastructure on the mountain. The new arrangement will see the ownership of current operator Cairngorm Mountain Ltd transfer from HIE to Natural Retreats.

Natural Retreats are revealing a £6.2m five-year investment plan which will secure the future of the Resort for the next 25 years. HIE is supporting the development with a £4m loan to develop a new Day Lodge.

Alex Paterson, Chief Executive at HIE commented: “Natural Retreats has the vision, ambition and experience to enable the resort to fulfil its potential as a world-class visitor destination. Their plans include the further development of snowsports and diversification of the business into a high quality, year-round attraction. Natural Retreats’ ambition to attract new visitors to Cairngorm will produce spin-off opportunities for other local businesses in the tourism sector, especially in Strathspey.”

With over 100 years of relevant international and regional leisure and tourism experience, Natural Retreats’ senior management in both Europe and the US bring a wealth of expertise to the Resort. The UK’s largest and busiest skiing destination will be led by Natural Retreats’ market-leading operational team, who have over 65 years of experience within Ski Resorts worldwide. The brand currently operates in close proximity to four world-renowned US ski destinations and Cairngorm Mountain is the perfect addition to their portfolio.

Matt Spence, founder and CEO of Natural Retreats added: “I am immensely thrilled with the appointment of Natural Retreats as operator of Cairngorm Mountain. I founded this company with the aim to create a way of life in a natural world and I am proud that Natural Retreats have been recognised in our quest. We truly believe Natural Retreats will elevate Cairngorm Mountain as one of the leading leisure and adventure resorts in Europe. My dream is to see both the prestigious international summer and winter X Games held here. Cairngorm Mountain is after all one of Scotland’s best assets with Natural Retreats aiming to provide the ultimate training ground for the next generations of Jenny Jones’ and Callum Smiths with the goal of gold at the next Winter Olympics. This is a four season resort with endless opportunities – we are determined to break seasonality here.

Our aim is to re-launch the Cairngorm Mountain brand to encapsulate the unique visitor experience Natural Retreats hopes to bring and to help create a sense of pride and place with the existing expertise on-site. Our mission will be to engage, inspire and mobilise the public. We believe Scotland has the best tourism opportunity in Europe now and for years to come. Visit Scotland’s Homecoming Scotland 2014 coupled with the Ryder Cup and Commonwealth Games will position Scotland on the international stage as a dynamic and creative nation and we’re honoured to be in the running to help welcome visitors from all over the world.”

**Vision**

To elevate Cairngorm Mountain as one of the leading leisure and adventure resorts in Europe, offering high quality services across all aspects of the site.  To invest and deliver a stepped change at Cairngorm Mountain, creating a visitor attraction that is diverse, commercially self-sustaining and maximising economic impact.

Key objectives include providing more activities at the Resort, creating a full day of activities outside of winter sports, creating a higher quality product offering, increasing new and repeat visitors, increasing food & beverage outlets, range and quality of offerings, expanding retail offering and improving quality and profitability of retail lines, offering a diverse snow sports destination, and creating a new Activity Centre and Education Centre.

**Investment**

Natural Retreats have a £6.2m five-year investment plan which is being delivered across three phases. Phase 1 involves refurbishing the day lodge and retail space, refurbishing Ptarmigan restaurant and exhibition space, enhancing signage and way-finding across the Resort, improving current operational efficiencies, creating an exceptional retail and F&B experience, starting planning application for new facilities and integrating the Natural Retreats brand. Phase 2 consists of, subject to planning, building a new Day Lodge with dedicated space for Retail, Catering, a new Activity Centre and Equipment Hire. This new building is planned for £4m and HIE have approved a loan to Natural Retreats for this. This phase also includes plans to launch a new nursery slope with new beginners’ lift and Perma-Snow slope. Phase 3 involves reconfiguring the Ptarmigan with a new Education Centre and a new restaurant.

**Current Strengths**

Cairngorm Mountain has performed well to date, launching the funicular and associated infrastructure on the mountain. Key strengths include the following:

* UK’s largest and busiest skiing destination. Established in 1961 and offering over 30km of ski runs. 2013 saw over 120,000 skiing and snowboarding visitors
* Only Funicular railway in Scotland. Completed in 2001 the Funicular is the main transport link to the top of Cairngorm Mountain and is open all year round. Circa 80,000 visitors made the ascent predominantly in the summer season.
* UK’s highest restaurant. Sitting at 1,097m above sea level the Ptarmigan building boasts impressive views of Britain’s highest mountain plateau. 84% of visitors to the Resort use the catering facilities
* Internationally renowned area of scientific interest. The Resort and surrounding areas contain unique natural habitats and wildlife protected by EU legislation
* Unique Leisure Asset. The Resort is supported by a well invested infrastructure encompassing Funicular Railway, ski uplift equipment, buildings and other infrastructure
* Unique visitor experience. The Resort is unique to the Country and features on many a visitor itinerary
* Very strong visitor numbers. The surrounding area attracts 1.4 million annual visitors.

**About** [**Natural Retreats**](http://www.naturalretreats.com/UK)

“Twenty years from now you will be more disappointed by the things you didn't do than by the ones you did. So throw off the bowlines, sail away from the safe harbour. Catch the trade winds in your sails. Explore. Dream. Discover.”

Mark Twain’s quote is as relevant today as it’s always been and reflects the sense of freedom and adventure we like our guests to experience on a Natural Retreats escape.

At Natural Retreats we pride ourselves on being a unique leisure and travel company offering extraordinary experiences at a selection of stunning coastal, countryside and wilderness locations around the world. We all work and live by the principles that underpin the company forever on a quest to help or guests and customers explore, dream and discover.

We are your guides to life's most amazing experiences and guardians of quality time understanding how important your leisure time is to collect moments to form memories that will last a lifetime.

Natural Retreats truly believes in sustainability, the communities and landscapes within which we develop are the real amenities. We have a real passion for these rural communities; after all, this is where its founder, Matthew Spence, came from having developed the first location in the Yorkshire Dales on his family farm back in 2006.

Now, Natural Retreats operates 18 destinations across Europe and the USA, each offering extraordinary experiences, activities and accommodation. Highlights include John O’Groats, North Highlands, Scotland, Trewhiddle, South Cornwall, England, Tsaina Lodge in Alaska and South Fork Lodge, Idaho, USA.

Find out more about [Natural Retreats on their website](http://www.naturalretreats.com/UK).

**About** [**HIE**](http://news.hie.co.uk/about-hie/default.html)

Highlands and Islands Enterprise (HIE) is a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government, with a unique remit which integrates economic and community development.

Active across half of Scotland, from Shetland to Argyll and from the Hebrides to Moray, HIE pursues four priorities to achieve sustainable growth:

* Supporting businesses and social enterprises to shape and realise their growth aspirations
* Strengthening communities and fragile areas
* Developing growth sectors, particularly distinctive regional opportunities
* Creating the conditions for a competitive and low carbon region

HIE has an annual budget of more than £75m and employs around 250 people in locations around the Highlands and Islands.

**About** [**Cairngorm Mountain resort**](http://www.cairngormmountain.org/)

The Cairngorm mountain railway is a unique Scottish visitor attraction. A highly ambitious and complex construction project in a sensitive and challenging mountain environment, the funicular carried its first passengers on Christmas Eve 2001, and was officially opened in June 2002. Just under two kilometres long, it replaced an outdated chairlift access system which had carried skiers up and down the mountainside since the 1960s. The funicular was designed to strengthen the tourism sector, which is a vital part of the local economy in what is now the Cairngorms National Park.

It enables snowsports enthusiasts to access the mountain in conditions which would have closed the chairlift, and provides summer visitors with an easy and enjoyable route into the heart of some of Scotland's most beautiful scenery. At the top station, visitors can experience spectacular mountain views, dine in the Ptarmigan restaurant, and learn about the history and geography of Cairngorm in an interactive exhibition. The Cairngorm plateau is a highly sensitive environment, home to many rare and fragile plant species, so access to the mountainside is carefully controlled. Operations at the site are currently managed for HIE by Cairngorm Mountain Ltd (CML), which became a subsidiary of the enterprise agency in 2008.  HIE has always been clear, however, that its ownership of the operating company was not intended to be a long-term arrangement.

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