

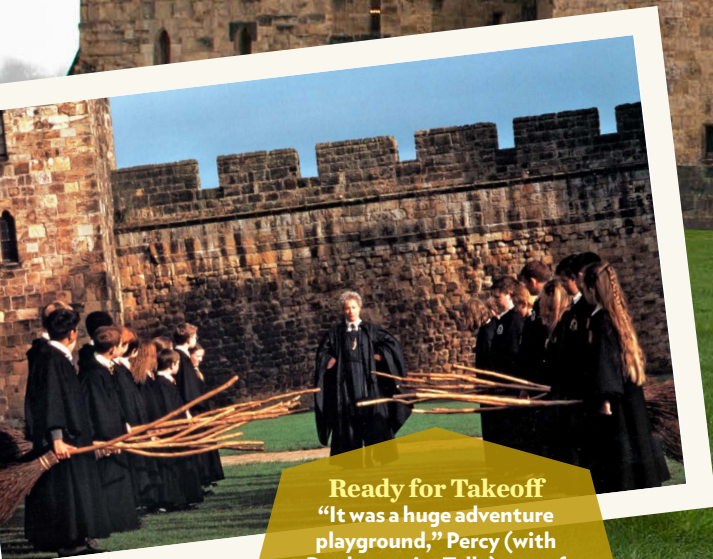
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LADY
MELISSA
PERCY

‘I Grew Up in Hogwarts!’

THE RISING FASHION DESIGNER OPENS UP ABOUT
HER MAGICAL CHILDHOOD, LIFE AS A ‘LADY’ AND
STARTING A NEW ADVENTURE IN AMERICA

BY MONIQUE JESSEN

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JILLIAN EDELSTEIN



Ready for Takeoff
“It was a huge adventure playground,” Percy (with Border terrier Tally) says of castle life. Inset: A scene from 2001’s *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer’s Stone* at Alnwick.



REDUX: HAIR & MAKEUP: RAE WAHLESON; CHARLOTTE TILBURY/COLOURS AGENCY; STYLIST: MARY-ANNA KEARNEY; SWEATER: MISTAMINA; PANTS: TRAG & BONE; SHOES: JIMMY CHOO; INSET: HARRY POTTER; RONALD GRANT/EVERETT

Melissa Percy never read the *Harry Potter* books, so she wasn’t one of the millions of children around the world who eagerly checked her mailbox for a letter from Hogwarts School of Witchcraft and Wizardry. Then again she didn’t need a letter—her mailbox was at Alnwick Castle, the family estate in north-east England that doubled as Hogwarts in the first few *Harry Potter* films. As a child she would Roll-erblade across the shiny marble floors by day and race to the top of the tower by night to climb into her four-poster bed. (Yes, just like Harry’s.) The priceless Canaletto paintings on the walls didn’t talk, of course, but there was a required passcode to enter the secret den. “It was adventure and very exciting,” says Percy—“Lady Melissa” by lineage; “Missy” to her close friends and family.

‘It was a lot of secret doors and secret rooms and ghost stories’

—PERCY, ON HER CHILDHOOD AT ALNWICK



Saddle Up
 “It was all very active,” Percy (at age 9) says of her early years. “There were no practical clothes for girls then. My mum bought me boys’ clothes.”



Their Home Is Their Castle
 The Percy family from left: Lord Max, Duchess Jane, Lady Melissa, Duke Ralph, Lady Catherine, Earl George. Right: the state dining room, where *Downton Abbey* once filmed.

But even as she moves on, home will always be Alnwick, which draws 800,000 tourists each year. The second-largest inhabited castle in Britain—just behind Windsor Castle with 150 rooms (see box)—the extraordinary estate has been in the family for more than 700 years. Upon the sudden 1995 death of Percy’s uncle Harry at age 42, her father inherited the property and all the titles that come with it. “I’ve grown up with it and got used to it,” she says of becoming a “lady” at age 8. (Her father is the 12th Duke of Northumberland, her mother, Jane, is the duchess, and her older siblings are Lady Catherine, 37; George, Earl Percy, 35; and Lord Max, 28.) At boarding school she downplayed her aristocratic pedigree: “I wanted everyone to know me as Missy—for who I was.”

When film crews descended in 2000, Percy was largely at school. When she *was* home, she was usually outside enjoying the more than 100,000 acres that extend from the estate. “From an early age we would go out with Mum and Dad shooting,” says Percy between sips of tea as Tally, her Border terrier, lounges at her feet in the family’s warm kitchen. (Like many of the rooms in the house, it is populated with taxidermied animals from the family’s frequent hunting trips.) “I caught my first salmon when I was 7, and I have this sweet picture of me with no front teeth, holding this enormous fish.”

Royal Wedding Chic
 Percy (right, with Chelsy Davy) attended the October wedding of friend Princess Eugenie. The carnival party the next day was “candy floss and hot dogs and normal and fun—exactly how Eugie is.”



“But it’s only now that I have started to appreciate what an incredibly special place it is.”

With its rolling woods, bubbling streams and roaming wildlife, the estate also provided ample inspiration for Percy’s new chapter as a fashion designer. This spring the former youth-tennis pro, 31, is launching her outdoor clothing label Mistamina in the U.S. She’s making other big moves as well: After her high-profile marriage to Thomas van Straubenzee—a close friend of Prince William’s—ended in 2016, she recently relocated to New York City to join her boyfriend of two years, hedge-fund manager Remy Trafelet. “Trying to stay positive and making a conscious effort to think happy thoughts,” she says of all the recent changes in her life, “that’s when you get good things done.”



At 14, Percy left boarding school to play tennis professionally in Florida but returned to the U.K. at 21. “I was missing normality, and I really missed my sister and my two brothers,” she says. She met van Straubenzee (known as Van) and became a fixture in royal circles before marrying at a fairy-tale wedding attended by 500 guests at the castle, including Prince William and Prince Harry as ushers. But the marriage didn’t last. Percy chalks up the split to growing apart and says they remain on “really good terms.” Still, the divorce upended her life. “I knew it was going to be tough—every single person I had met [since they started dating when she was 21] in England was through him,” she says. Although she is no longer in touch with William and Kate (“everyone says they don’t pick sides in a divorce, but it’s quite hard not to”), she has forged a close friendship with Prince Harry’s ex-girlfriend Chelsy Davy: “She is my best friend in the world.”

It was after a soul-searching trip to Japan that Percy came up with the concept of Mistamina and launched her first collection in 2017, focusing on casual crewneck sweaters with elbow and shoulder-patch detailing, all named after a past or present family dog. “I just thought, ‘There

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‘It’s about having fun, being outdoorsy & being comfortable.’
 —PERCY, ON HER CLOTHING LINE

is nothing fun and cool for girls to wear outside,” she says. “There was a definite adventure element that I wanted to put into Mistamina.” (The name comes from an accidental misspelling of “misdemeanor”: “Spelling hasn’t always been my strong point,” she says with a laugh.)

As for her own adventure, Percy is concentrating on growing her line. “I would like to bring out a range of dog coats, gloves and hats,” she says. And she is excited to settle into life in the U.S. but will always make time to travel back home—even if she gets frequent questions from airport security about the title that appears on her passport. “In America it’s funny because they always say, ‘Is ‘Lady’ your first name?’ And I go, ‘No, it’s a title.’ And they say, ‘Oooh are you royalty?’” she says. “And I always say, ‘It’s just part of a name, like *Lady and the Tramp*.’ I use that a lot!” ●

BY THE NUMBERS

SECRETS OF THE CASTLE

1096
 The year construction started on the castle.

300
 Great white cherry trees in the gardens, known as the Versailles of the North.

15,000
 Books in the library.