



Beautiful hill fort

The translation of Dun Aluinn offers only a hint of the elegance this Perthshire holiday home affords discerning guests

Words **Nichola Hunter**
Photographs **Neale Smith**

In today's Instagrammable society, luxury has come to epitomise bling, but at Dun Aluinn luxury is all about class – understated, elegant class. Through their company, Corryard, John Burke and his wife Susie have been renovating old and listed buildings in Perthshire for the past 12 years. “About 10 years ago we renovated an old mill outside Crieff,” John recalls. “We converted it into a holiday home and it did quite well. We sold it a few years ago and decided we’d keep our eyes open for another one. We already have a few smaller holiday lets but we wanted to do something a bit bigger again.” The couple spotted Dun Aluinn about three years ago, but it wasn't until October 2017 that they purchased it. “It's had several incarnations over the years,” says John. “It's been a boarding house, a local school and, in the 1920s, a hotel. When we took it on, the previous owners had done some renovations, and to a high specification, but they hadn't done the entire building.” Aside from the potential internally, the location of the house was appealing as well. “It sits in its own grounds on a site of about 5.5 acres, so it's quite private. It also has great views, Dun Aluinn means ‘beautiful hill fort’ in Gaelic which is apt. However, despite its privacy, it's only about a 700-metre walk into the town of Aberfeldy.”



Clockwise from top left: the exterior at dusk; restored wood panelling sets off the lounge; a sitting room; the extra long dining table



The plan was to turn the house around in a year, and as Susie is an architect and interior designer, the ground rules were quickly established. "We're both quite strong-minded so we made the decision at the start of the project, so as to cut down on any marital dissatisfaction, that Susie would have the final say whether I agreed or not."

This decision certainly paid off because this October, exactly a year after they purchased, John and Susie opened the doors of Dun Aluinn as an exclusive use venue.

"Our objective was simple," says John. "To achieve a matt finish – no bling. To create an interior that was super, super luxurious but timeless in design. One that will still look cool in 20 years." The brief may have been simple but getting it to that stage still involved a huge amount of work.

"The original floorboards had been covered by plywood as the previous owners had intended to lay carpet, so we took all this up and laid new flooring. The original wood panels and doors were covered in years and years of white gloss paint. It was a meticulous job to strip them back to their original state and it took about six months."

John continues: "The kitchen and a few of the bathrooms were already in the property but we took them out and started again. Now the bathrooms are all fitted with Dornbracht fixtures and fittings. They're so well engineered and last forever. In the majority of the bathrooms we went for an aged brass finish, again to create a timeless look. The sinks however, came from an Italian company, Cielo. There is one company in London that supplies these sinks, but we sourced them direct from Italy. We thought it was worth it to have the

unusual shapes and the mix of colours." The kitchen also isn't typical either in colour or design. "The kitchen is super cool," says John. "Susie designed it and we had it manufactured through Braco Designs in Braco. It's solid walnut with an oak interior and a lovely brass detailing around the top edges. The floor tiles came from Italy. They're individually and randomly laid, so a mix of shades of grey and dark blue."

Susie also drew up the designs for the bespoke dining table, which is a staggering 5.5 metres long. "We had it manufactured by Black Isle Bronze in Nairn and it's a single-cast bronze table," says John. "After doing some research, Black Isle Bronze think it's the longest bronze table in the world and certainly the longest they've ever made. The oak top was made by another company. As you can see, the table is quite narrow because we wanted guests to interact with the people opposite them. It's all about getting friends and family together over food and wine and it's certainly the centrepiece of that room, although the sofa is quite a talking point too. It came from B&B Italia in Italy and again we had it custom made to fit the space exactly."

There is no detail in this property that hasn't been meticulously thought out, from painting the internal frames of the windows black – to frame the views – to the bespoke light fittings to accentuate the ambience in each room, as John explains. "We did spend considerable time on the lighting design and we used a company in London called Kreon. Most of the light fittings are directional which creates a great atmosphere in the evening. I especially love the light above the dining table, it's incredibly modern and it looks amazing at night."



Clockwise from left: chairs at the kitchen island; the fireplace in the hall; two of the bedrooms; the kitchen manufactured by Braco Designs; a bathroom; the view from the terrace

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There's no denying that John and Susie are positioning Dun Aluinn at the very top end of the market. Now available for exclusive use and high end self-catering with butler services, the couple can also organise a turn down service, a full range of activities and of course, top-notch catering from their partners, Balintaggart Farm, but this level of quality and individuality in the furniture, fixtures and fittings is somewhat unusual in the hospitality industry, even at the top end.

John proves the point when he emphasises how good every bedroom is. "We didn't want our guests fighting for the best bedroom – there is no best bedroom – they are all fabulous. However, our favourite bedroom when we stay is the one with the freestanding bath. It has a lovely B&B Italia bed and beautiful double doors to the en-suite. It also has an unusual walk-in shower and the original fireplace which we found behind a false wall. The tiling was still intact, so we made it a feature in the en-suite, making the room twice as big and fitting the double doors. We didn't have to retain it, but we felt that it added to the character of the house."

Character is certainly another thing that Dun Aluinn has in abundance along with luxury of course, but best of all, there's absolutely no bling.

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