





HIGHLAND HIDEAWAY

An Irish couple put restraint and simplicity at the core of their restored Victorian holiday home, in the beautiful Scottish countryside.

PHOTOGRAPHY **RUTH MARIA MURPHY** ASSISTED BY **SHAUNA LALLY** WORDS **ORLA NELIGAN**





The orange corner sofa is a B&B Italia Tufty-Too design by Patricia Urquiola, while the tables are from Oasiq. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, FROM LEFT TO RIGHT** John and Susie in the doorway of Dun Aluinn. Views of Tay Valley. The radiators were salvaged from an old school in Blairgowrie and are so heavy that it took six men to move each one. **OPPOSITE PAGE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** John, Susie and John's son Rory sit on Oasiq chairs on the terrace next to a Kadai Fire Bowl. John's 1940s drinks cabinet came all the way from Fins de Siècles in Barcelona. The Heron lamp is from CTO Lighting by Michael Verheyden. The original mosaic tiles and front door make a striking first impression.



There's no shortbread-tin-twee or tartan curtains in Mullingar-based John Burke and Susie Whyte's nine-bedroom period holiday home in Scotland. In fact, there are no curtains at all. "It's really about bringing the landscape inside and ensuring the building doesn't try to compete with it," explains Susie. The landscape in question is the Tay Valley, overlooked by mist-shrouded mountains, a place of quiet beauty, the type of place you'd expect to find a homely Highland lodge with open fires, wood panelling and the odd pheasant wandering around outside. But it wasn't always so homely.

"It looked like a big fancy cream cake," notes Susie of her initial introduction to the property, known as Dun Aluinn. The cornices and gables were painted candy pink, typical of its Queen Anne style, and very little updating had been done to the interior with the exception of a new heating system and windows. The couple wanted to create something that didn't compromise on quality and finish, yet still respected the integrity of the building, a former hotel and boarding house for the local school.

Susie set about dialling back those pink details, revealing both the architecture and the landscape. "It had this lovely eerie, haunted house feel to it and I didn't want to lose that," she says. "My aim was to reveal the architecture, as opposed to renovate it." Taking no credit for the decorative conclusion, John handballs to his wife Susie, who "had the final say from the start, with his full agreement". Given her extensive career as an interior designer and architect it made sense, although, she admits, the design is an expression of both their talents, John being the more flamboyant in terms of style and Susie more restrained.

It was John's persistence and "can-do" attitude that got the Italian Art Deco drinks cabinet from Barcelona to Aberfeldy, for example. The dining room table, on the other hand, was Susie's brainchild. John was happy to buy a premade table, but Susie had the idea to design and make it from scratch. The result is a 5.5-metre work of art made from oak and poured bronze – understated



ABOVE LEFT The original wood window panels were painted a gloss white, so the couple carefully stripped them back to bare wood.

LEFT Simple Boila chairs do not distract from the table. The light above the table was also designed by Susie and manufactured by Kreon in London. **OPPOSITE PAGE** The pitch pine original floor was patched together by the builders, keeping the integrity of the property intact. Susie designed the single casted 5.5-metre bronze and oak table, which was made by Black Isle Bronze in Nairn, Northern Scotland and took an articulated lorry and a crane to put into position.





yet a real focal point in the house, and a symbol of celebration. Susie explains, “Like many of the design choices, the table is confidently simple, using luxurious materials and expert craftsmanship, without a whiff of bling.” The process of instating 21st-century smarts and swagger – without overly gilding the lily – while maintaining the authenticity of a period home takes careful precision, and pushing delicate boundaries.

Even for a seasoned pro like Susie, the 604-square-metre house did provide a few challenges. The bathrooms were the most rewarding aspect of the design process but were equally the most demanding. They had to be minimalist, simple yet functional – a difficult balancing act in an old property. The Japanese bath in one of the bedrooms, for example, required precision planning. “We had to bring new plumbing to the area, dig up joists to sink a special water tray and waterproof around it. Special lats were made to match the floorboards; it involved a lot of mixing of trades.” Although restraint and simplicity underpin the design, there are some bold and daring flourishes. Susie had reservations about the Farrow & Ball Off-Black hallway but it makes a dramatic, and surprisingly warm, entrance. “It’s probably my favourite space, the dark walls and the open fire make it really cosy. I love the panelling and the staircase with the original banister and ironmongery.”

Authenticity was a constant watchword for Susie. A lot of the original woodwork is still intact. “The floors in the sitting room are made up of three different sections of wood. It’s not perfect but the building has an age and we didn’t want to hide that. It was about keeping it honest.” She admits that proved tricky at times when her team wanted to make everything shiny and new. “There was a bit of convincing,” she laughs. “But, carpenters Hamish Walker and Andrew Brown were masters at finding pieces of wood that matched and seamlessly blending them with the original.”

This modern ode to late Victorian living continues in the kitchen with a design that riffs on a traditional scullery kitchen with simple shelves above and open shelves below, with a nod to the contemporary with the addition of a walnut veneer. “It had to have two functions: be able to host a caterer and also be functional for everyday living. A local kitchen company,



ABOVE LEFT John in his happy place, the kitchen. **LEFT** Bar stools from Oasiq sit at Silestone countertops. **RIGHT** The kitchen was supplied by local company Braco Designs and mixes a scullery layout with modern finishes, such as the American walnut veneer on an oak base structure and a Quooker tap on the island sink. The floor tiles are from Mutina’s Mews range and the cooker is a Mercury 1200.





ABOVE FROM LEFT A white chair from XVL in Belgium sits in the window of a bedroom next to a small Lilypad side table and a white rug from Linie Design. A white stone bath in the master bedroom has dual views over the valley. This oak four-poster bed from Benchmark in England is covered with beautiful throws from Johnstons of Elgin in Northern Scotland.





Braco, did an excellent job merging the two so that it feels like a piece of furniture that simply blends in with the house,” says Susie.

There are spaces in the house where an all-pervading sense of time suspended remains and others where modern living announces itself with aplomb. A purpose-built boot room is just that, with no attempt to make it look old. Anything new in the house is in the context of the building and not imposed on it. “We used an Iroko veneer in the boot room which contrasts with a lot of the house, but it works beautifully.” What underpins it all is Susie’s sympathetic approach to marrying old and new. “There is a sense of achievement now it’s all done. We went over budget and that can be stressful but I know we’ve created the home we wanted: it’s not austere, it’s comfortable, simple and honest.”

Dun Aluinn is also available to rent as a luxury holiday home that sleeps up to 18. dunaluinn.com

CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The B&B Italia bed is a deep wine colour, and is complemented by handmade leather lights by LuLé Studio in Paris, while the turquoise pillows are from Dunnes Stores. The teak sink in the twin bedroom is styled on a Japanese ofuro soaking tub, handmade by William Garvey Furniture. A pale pink sink by Cielo sets a serene tone in the master en suite, offset by a teak wooden vanity unit also made by William Garvey Furniture.