

Sleepy Hollow

Built of Caithness stone and finished in oak, this Wester Ross newbuild is a bit special

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At the end of a build spanning eight years, Chrissy Nason-Smith and her husband Richard Smith have the kind of Highland home most of us can only dream of - the prolonged process has been worth every challenging step.

Chrissy and Richard first consulted Inverness architects Maxwell & Company in 2001, to make alterations to existing plans for a piece of land in the village of Shieldaig, Wester Ross.

It took over two years - and several council meetings - to achieve this, even though the couple have strong links to the village, and only wanted a sympathetic build.

"Richard spent childhood holidays at his aunt's house in Shieldaig," explains Chrissy. "His ancestry is deeply rooted here."

Richard introduced Chrissy to the area in the early 1970s and she was immediately besotted. Living and working in London, the couple have always relished the serenity of this spot and brought their own children here for years before building this house.

Richard's parents purchased the land in the 1970s from the local estate and endured their own battle to gain the original planning permission (for a single-storey dwelling), partly because of the history of the site. It was used for open-air worship from 1843 by the Free Church of Scotland.

However, their project didn't progress beyond foundations. Chrissy and Richard planned a larger home, over two storeys, but tradition always lay at its heart. "We had a stonemason on site for five months, but it was worth it," says Chrissy.

Today, the house, which from its elevated position overlooks Shieldaig Island and beyond to the Western Isles, blends with the rocky hillside against which it nuzzles, thanks to its slate roof and walls of Torridon stone.

Clever design features balance the inherently traditional exterior.

"A contemporary build would normally facilitate lots of glass to maximise the views," says Chrissy; "We couldn't

do this." But by including a square section to the front, where traditionally an entrance porch would be sited, they accommodated significant glazing and 180 degree views from the dining room.

The location posed challenges. Acquisition of planning coincided with a building boom, meaning the couple found it tricky to secure a contractor.

"We became the main contractor, and brought in trades," says Chrissy, who

securing commissions for private clients.

The interiors of this house, named "An Cos" - Gaelic for "The Hollow" - have a style that, while mindful of tradition, is fresh and contemporary. The couple's commitment to an impeccable finish is clear; a natural look was achieved with Caithness stone and solid oak flooring, along with oak tongue-and-groove in the hall, landing and stairwell.

"Highland homes tend to come into their own in the autumn and winter"

together with Richard spent chunks of time here overseeing work. Some tradesmen proved invaluable, others totally unreliable, contributing to delays.

All the while, Chrissy was collating ideas for the interior. Back in 2001 the aftermath of 9/11 led her to take stock of her career in tourism and, enthused by this project, she embarked on an interior design course, subsequently

The bedrooms also feature painted tongue-and-groove that stretches to dado height and, in the master bedroom, to full height; the latter space includes a walk-in dressing room and en suite, but it's the open fire that takes centre stage. Like the one in the downstairs lounge, the fireplace was sourced from OKA.

Chrissy felt good design choice was lacking in the Highlands, so personally



Clockwise from main: the sitting room; the exterior of An Cos; the dining room; the staircase; the kitchen with window seat, below right



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shifted a few lorry loads of furniture and accessories up the road from London. Bathrooms boast fittings by Lefroy Brooks, while furnishings throughout blend antique treasures with contemporary choices.

“We have a thriving artistic community”

Nevertheless, she utilised Scottish talents where possible. Curtains, roman blinds and cushions were made to order by Andreana McEwan of Curtains Direct in Inverness.

“Highland homes tend to come into their own in the autumn and winter,” says Chrissy; “Most of the soft furnishings and curtains are cosy wools and weaves with natural trimmings that reflect the palette of the surroundings.”

An Allness-based craftsman made the stairs and external doors, as well as feature pieces to the couple’s design, including the landing console table, a dining table, benches for the boot and steam rooms, and a sideboard.

Rather than go to the expense of having rugs made to fit specific spaces



such as the stair landing, Chrissy used hand-loomed wool carpet, cut and finished with cotton herringbone edging.

Original artwork, many from local artists, adorns the walls. Sammy Banister’s abstract canvases grace the lounge and landing while framed ceramic pictures in the master bedroom are by Kathy Laird. And she used moody black and white images of the area by local photographer and resident Steve Carter in the stairwell and hall. “We are lucky to

have a thriving artistic community on the West Coast, so there was plenty of choice,” says Chrissy.

Chrissy designed the kitchen, where a window seat capitalises on views. While well equipped for groups, the kitchen, like the house, was nevertheless conceived of as a space for Chrissy and Richard and their family. Now the couple are making An Cos available as a holiday let, and the personal quality lingers. The upstairs hall is lined with

family photos dating back several generations, taken in and around Shieldaig.

Downstairs, the study-cum-bedroom has an upholstered sleigh day bed with pullout under-bed, ideal for less mobile guests, who can also use the rainwater shower, replete with seats, in the granite-clad steam room. “There is nothing nicer than thawing out there after a day outdoors,” says Chrissy.

Walking, fishing, stalking, kayaking, canoeing ... there are plenty of ways to make a return to this steam room seem like heaven on earth. For others, pink sunsets and sightings of white tailed sea eagles are heaven-sent enough. With characteristic attention to detail, the couple ensure a warm welcome with home baking and goodies from the local smokehouse. The local pub a short walk away, and award-winning dining a short drive, are further persuasion, were it needed, of An Cos as the ultimate Highland dream.

An Cos sleeps up to ten adults and two children. Seven-night bookings are available from Friday to Friday, with rates from £1,450, although three or four night bookings are available in low season. Tel: 01381 610496 or visit www.LHScotland.com; www.ancosshieldaig.co.uk