

Open for inspiration

A holiday hideaway built into a Hebridean hillside mixes traditional know-how with contemporary flair

BY FIONA REID

THE MAJORITY OF HOLIDAY accommodation, says Rhoda Campbell, is created for families or a group of friends to share, but what if you're a couple looking for a romantic hideaway that feels far removed from civilisation? Rhoda and husband Neil came up with the away-from-it-all concept for Blue Reef Cottages in 2002.

"We didn't really know if the project would take off," she says. "We had this idea but we'd never tackled anything like it before."

Set in the remote crofting village of

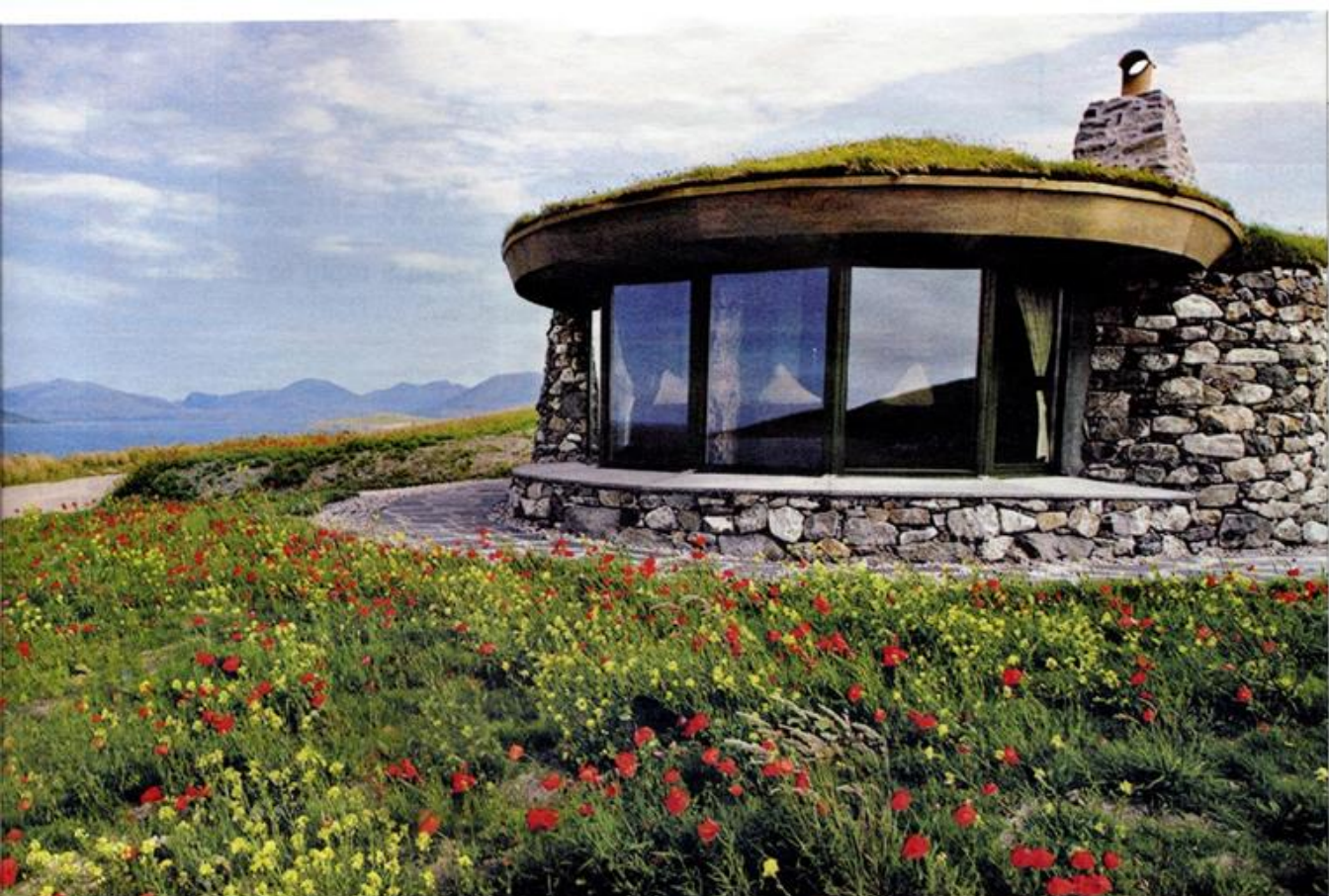
Scarista on the Isle of Harris in the Outer Hebrides and overlooking one of its most spectacular bays, the location of Blue Reef Cottages is idyllic. A *Homes & Gardens* magazine survey voted the Hebrides number two in a world poll of top ten holiday islands, and I can understand why.

With pristine sands and blue, blue seas, it's the perfect place to do absolutely nothing, except perhaps take a stroll and gaze out to the views that stretch across to Taransay and the Isle of Uist. And when it rains – as it almost certainly will – retreat to the cottages,

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curl up on a sofa in front of a bay window and watch the weather advance.

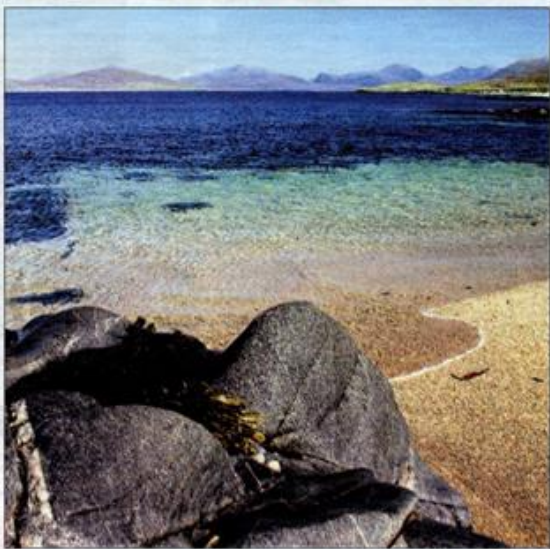
The term "holiday cottage" conjures up all sorts of twee visions, but the Campbells were determined to defy such expectations in building their two cottages. "We wanted to appeal to the very top end of the market, as there was no-one else doing that in the area," Rhoda says. Within two months of opening in May 2003, Blue Reef Cottages were awarded a five-star grading from VisitScotland. This year they were shortlisted for the VisitScotland Thisle Award for Innovation.

The Campbells took their design cue from the kind of understated luxury provided by a boutique hotel, with an emphasis on quality and comfort. It's this aesthetic approach and attention to detail that sets these cottages apart from the norm.

The exterior is the first surprise, as both the cottages are dug into the gentle slope of a hill and constructed from reclaimed stone with grass roofs laid with the local "machair" turf.

The front of each building is curved to form an expansive bay window within the main living area, with the

Blue Reef Cottages rise out of the hillside, above; a view from the beach, right; the rustic kitchen, opposite



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kitchen tucked behind leading to an adjoining dining space. There is an office/study with PC, phone and fax for those who would prefer not to lose touch with the outside world and a master bedroom and generous bathroom – with a Jacuzzi bath-for-two and double-sauna.

Rhoda terms the style “modern traditional” – a mix of organic, earthy finishes and contemporary comforts. The slate flooring, for example, takes on the feel of warm stone underfoot thanks to the addition of underfloor heating, while the exposed stone wall in the living space incorporates a Morso “Squirrel” stove that burns local peat and wood. The deep and comfy couches, meanwhile, were sourced from Sofa Workshop, while the king-size timber beds are made up with the crispest white bed-linen. The spaces have been designed with romance in mind – many guests are honeymooners – but, says Rhoda, there’s nothing “schmalzty” about the experience.

The Campbells were living in Skye when they came up with the idea of building on this croft, which had been in Rhoda’s family since the 1920s. Although trained as an accountant, later Neil had been working as a fish farmer, while Rhoda was in sales and marketing for the fish farming industry, so this was a departure for them both. They worked on the project with Lewis-based architect Stuart Bagshaw, whose sympathetic approach matched their ambitions for the project.

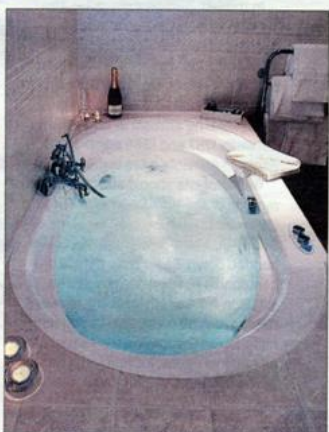
Stuart took his cue from the environment and the island’s past – the design reflects Harris’s Neolithic history, when housing was situated underground. “He warmed to this idea straight away,” Rhoda recalls. The couple gained confidence after viewing one of his designs in the neighbouring village, which had a similar concept.

The cottages were built using traditional methods. One uses stone reclaimed from an old sheep pen, the other, stone from a derelict building on another croft. There’s a sense of timelessness about them both.

The structure is supported inside by heavy larch pillars formed using timber from the grounds of Lewis Castle in Stornoway. These, with the slate floor and exposed stone detailing, give the interior a solid feel.

While Stuart designed the layout, Neil and Rhoda chose the furnishings and fittings, including the pine kitchen that echoes the timber ceilings. Their choices were personal, and inspired

Flowers add a splash of colour to the exterior, right; a bathroom and living room, below



primarily by the architecture and location. “Because of the nature of the weather on Harris, we wanted to create a space where you could spend the whole day happily tucked up inside,” says Rhoda.

“We were always thinking about what we’d want for our own home.”

The project proved remarkably straightforward – just as well, since the

couple were still living on Skye during the construction process and visited the site only a handful of times.

“In many ways that made the process less stressful, as we were able to leave things in Stuart’s hands,” says Rhoda.

The end result was even better than they had anticipated. “There are things you can’t imagine from plans, like how

the tree trunks look internally, or the way the turf bursts into wild flowers, not only around the cottage, but on the roof,” says Rhoda. “At first we were thinking, how is this going to look? But it’s beautiful.” **SM**

■ For details about rates and availability at Blue Reef Cottages, tel: 01859 550370 or visit www.stay-bebrides.com

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