



HOUSE TRACKS

HOME-GROWN TAKEOVERS HAVE EVOLVED IN RECENT DECADES FROM CUTESY COTTAGES WITH LOTS OF PINE TO REMOTE SHEPHERD'S HUTS AND CONVERTED WINDMILLS. NOW THEY ARE EVEN SHARPER AND SMARTER WITH MORE DESIGN SWAGGER. HERE ARE BRITAIN'S BEST PLACES TO RENT FOR A SUMMER STAYCATION



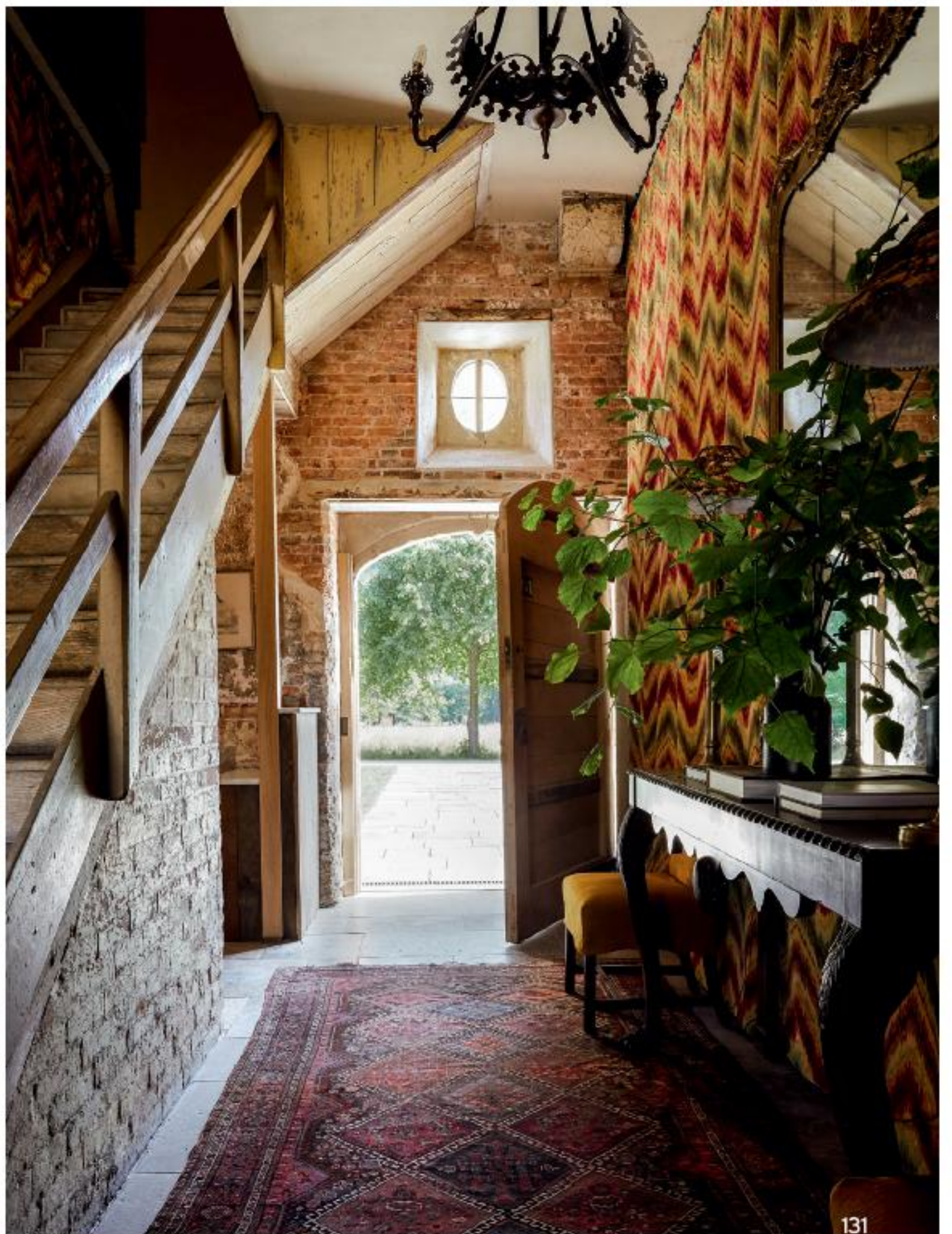


BEST FOR ECCENTRIC CHARACTER

THE RIDING HOUSE, DORSET

There is a faint smell of a tack room in the comfortable sitting room of the Riding House. The leathery scent comes from a far wall, where there are rows of shiny saddles on sturdy beams, a reminder that this is indeed a 17th-century stable block. The building is the latest piece of a massive restoration on Dorset's Shaftesbury estate. Nick Ashley-Cooper became the 12th Earl of Shaftesbury in 2005, when his older brother died of a heart attack at just 27. Ashley-Cooper had been a successful DJ and music promoter in New York before moving back to the crumbling ancestral seat. In 2010, he and his wife Dinah Streifeneder, a vet, began turning the main house, St Giles, into a home as colourful as its past. Now, the next-door stables have been converted into an eight-bedroom guesthouse. It is a place of new and old, where the brick floors, intentionally rough paintwork and frayed-wood partitions remind you that you're sleeping in ancient stalls. Theatricality runs through it all, with Pierre Frey velvet used as wallpaper hung on wrought-iron poles, and a giant, bronze horse head in the entrance hall. Other touches are faintly spooky, such as the mantrap hanging beside the bar, or the leg emerging from a wall in one room. 'We didn't want it to be safe,' says Ashley-Cooper of the project. 'We wanted it to be bold, brave, an experience.'

Stays on a country estate have never felt so thrilling.
 SALLY SHALAM +44 1725 517 214; stgileshouse.com.
 From £1,800 per night (sleeps 18)



PHOTOGRAPHS: JUSTIN BARTON; PAUL MASSEY



BEST FOR WILDLIFE SPOTTING

GLENFESHIE LODGE, CAIRNGORMS

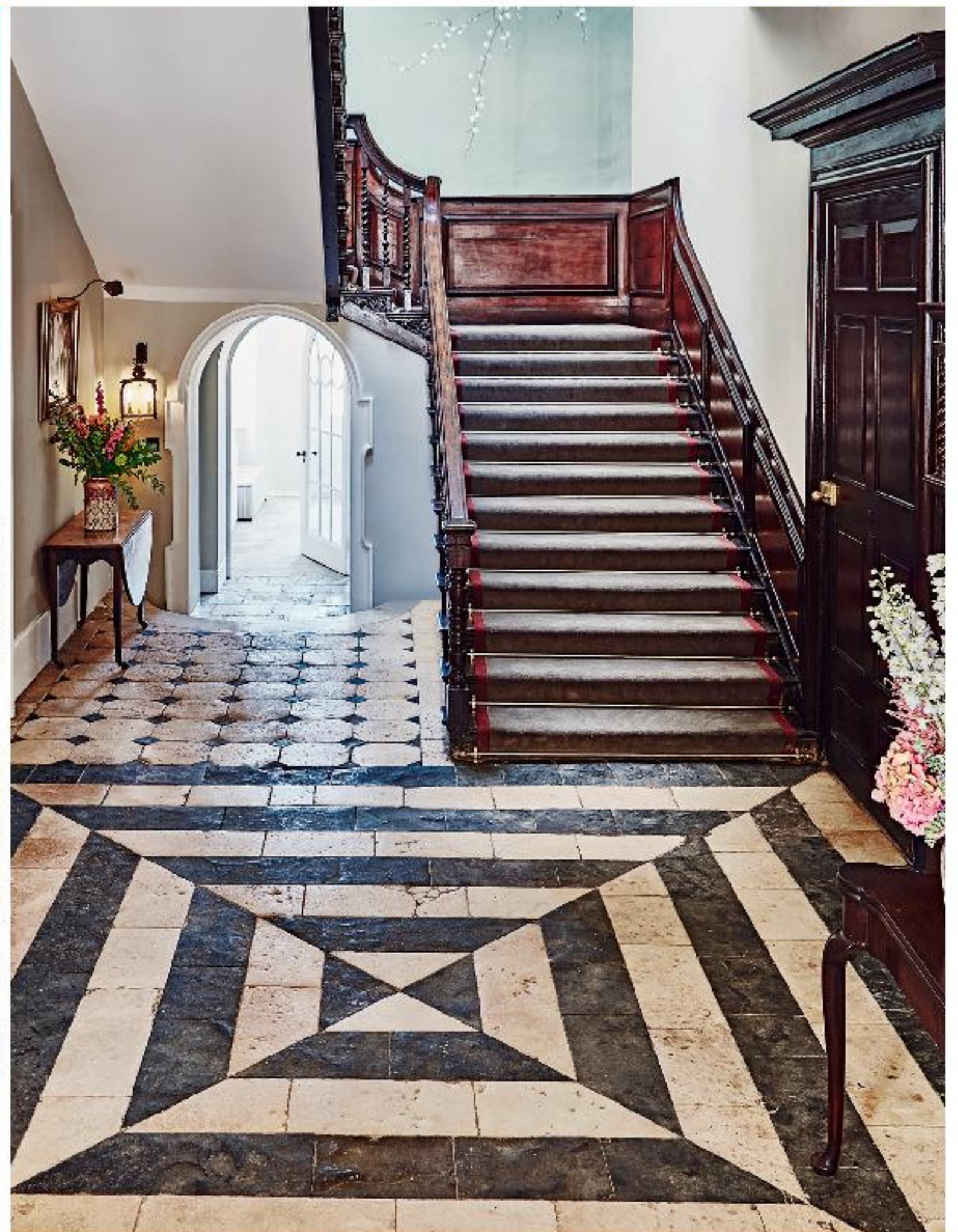
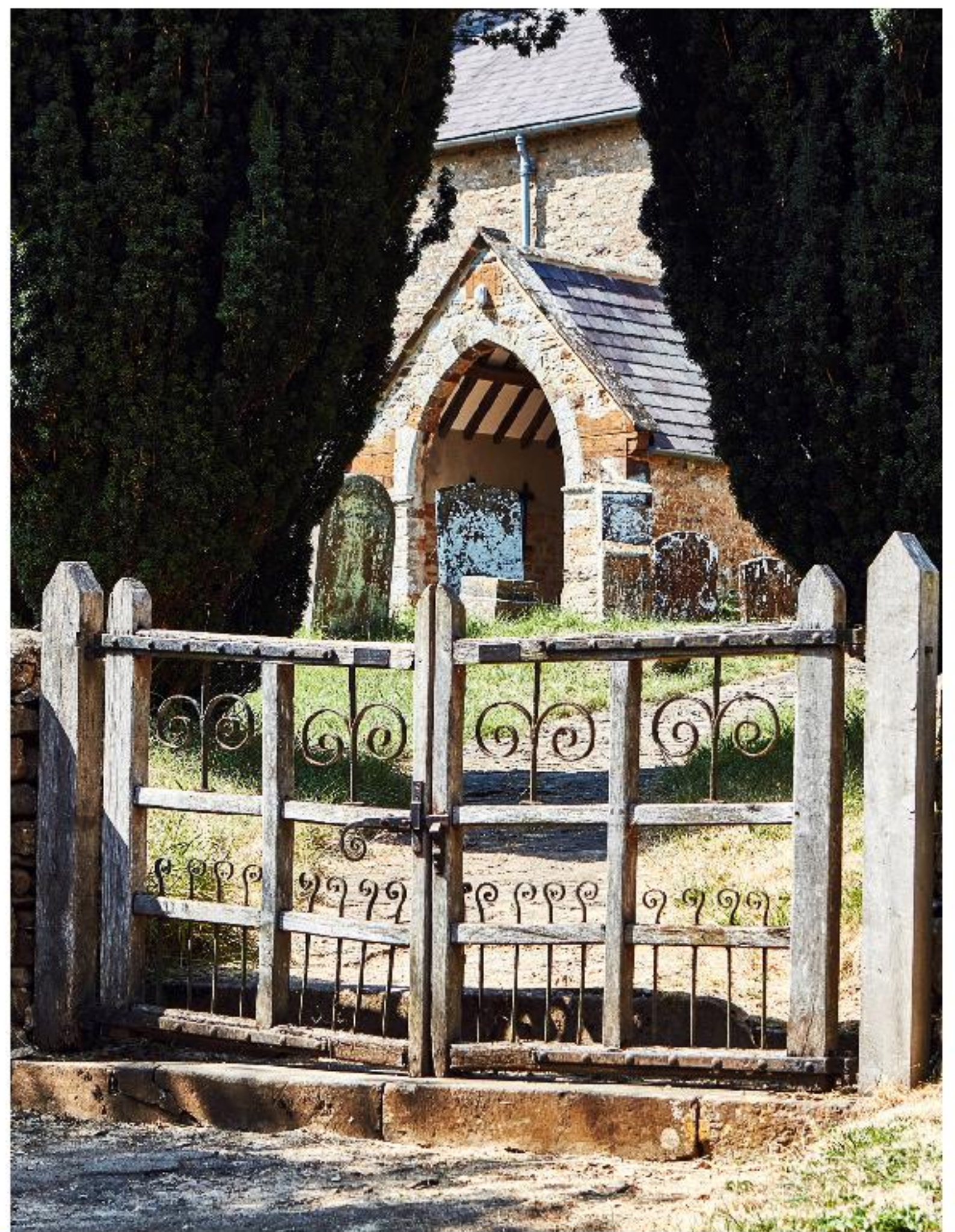
The general narrative for smart Highlands stays in recent years has been to play with tradition rather than stick to it. Indeed, Glenfeshie Lodge's owner Anders Holch Povlsen, a Danish businessman and Scotland's largest landowner, has been part of that trend, bringing various degrees of Scandi minimalism to his four other rentable houses set on 221,000 acres. But Glenfeshie Lodge, near Braemar, is the one that sticks most closely to its 19th-century roots. The grey-stone hunting lodge, standing proud over a mist-cloaked valley, is said to be where Sir Edwin Landseer painted *The Monarch of the Glen*, the stag on Walkers shortbread tins. There's a strand of Scottish Victoriana to the house and its surrounding 45,000-acre estate – from being met by head gamekeeper Davie McGibbon, in Glenfeshie tweed plus-fours, to sleeping in a floral-print, four-poster bed. But a more timeless plan underpins this place: striding up the 1,118-metre Sgor Gaoith for views down to Loch Einich and across the Moine Mhor (Great Moss), McGibbon explains how his team are keeping deer numbers down to regrow these woodlands and welcome red squirrels, pine martens and endangered black grouse and capercaillie. A golden eagle, flying towards an afternoon sun over Coire Garbhloch, appears like a totemic endorsement of Holch Povlsen's scheme to rewild all of his land. At dinner, chef Richard Turner serves local venison with hedgehog mushrooms and purple sprouting broccoli foraged from the walled gardens of Aldourie Castle, about an hour's drive away, and eaten with stag-antler cutlery. It tastes like the Highlands, done just right. GABRIEL O'RORKE +44 1540 661 619; glenfeshie.scot. From £9,500 for two nights full board for eight people (sleeps 10)

BEST FOR HOUSE PARTIES

THORPE MANOR, OXFORDSHIRE

Georgian high society was never much into Swedish hot tubs, Negroni sharpeners and fire-pit suppers. But what's clever about Henry and Natasha Teare's conversion of this Grade II-listed manor house on the edge of the Cotswolds is that they've created a vibe of unstuffy modern hedonism, without compromising the place's red-stone splendour. When Henry inherited the 17th-century Banbury pile from his stepfather Derek Ancil, a jockey and horse trainer who once won the Hennessy Gold Cup, it was as tired as Red Rum in the early 1990s. He and Natasha quit jobs in the city to spend three years overseeing a top-to-toe renovation that included unearthing the original flagstone flooring in the entrance hall. Each of the 14 bedrooms has been named after one of Ancil's horses: such as Prince Bon Bon, with its wildflower pictures on pale-pink walls, and cosy Merryman, with mustard headboards and lemon-and-white striped curtains. In one bathroom there's an avocado-coloured Roman bath, in another a set of jockey scales. Butlers are on hand with morning flat whites, sipped beside the drawing-room log fire with the papers - and they double as cocktail makers in the velvet-filled bar. When it's time to eat, everyone gathers in the kitchen as the chef slow-cooks lamb over the fire pit. Clay-pigeon shooting, falconry and archery are all available on the 200-acre estate, but simpler pleasures are closer by: afternoon games of croquet; lazing under tartan blankets in the oak-panelled cinema. For all its history, it's a house for hunkering down with friends and forgetting the world.

EMMA LOVE +44 1295 711 006; thorpemanorhouse.co.uk. From £10,000 for a three-night weekend stay (sleeps 28)





THIS VICTORIAN LODGE IS SET IN WHAT SOME SAY



IS THE MOST BEAUTIFUL CORNER OF SCOTLAND



BEST FOR OUTDOOR ADVENTURES

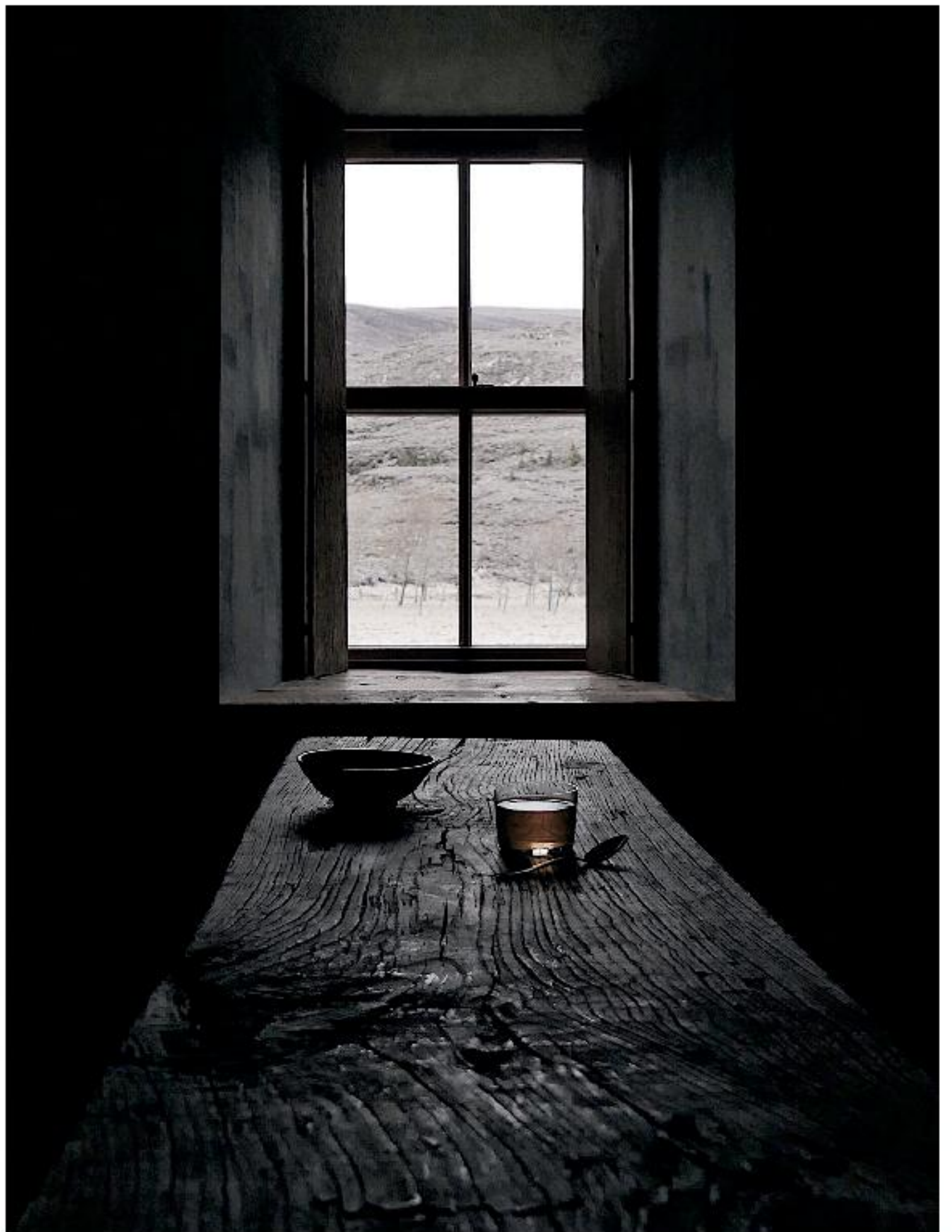
GLEN AFFRIC ESTATE, INVERNESS-SHIRE

Dudley Coutts Marjoribanks, 1st Baron Tweedmouth, gave the world some lasting gifts in the second half of the 19th century. The banking scion, East India Company director and Liberal politician also dabbled in canine genetics, breeding the first golden retrievers. In 1872, he completed a Highlands hunting lodge beside a loch in Glen Affric, gifting it to his daughter. Like the golden retriever, the 10,000-acre estate has aged well, and remains popular with the huntin', shootin', fishin' set. The current laird and lady are David and Jane Matthews, Pippa Middleton's in-laws, who own the Eden Rock hotel in St Barth's. Management is overseen by Masterpiece Estates, an offshoot of the Oetker Collection, which, on top of the Caribbean mainstay, runs Le Bristol Paris and The Lanesborough in London. The Victorian feel of the lodge has been preserved, with some thoughtful contemporary additions, and now guests are provided with a designated host. Mine was James Middleton, Kate and Pippa's bearded brother, a genuine outdoorsman who clearly loves the land in a way that goes well beyond the payroll. What to do? This is the serious Highlands, about an hour's drive south-west of Inverness. So you stalk deer or shoot partridge – or clay pigeons, if you are squeamish. You fish, ride, hike, sail on the loch or sunbathe on its startlingly lovely beach. You eat and drink like a Tweedmouth. Or you simply sit still and gaze out of a window, almost moved to tears at what some say is the most beautiful glen in Scotland. STEVE KING +44 20 7079 1621; oetkercollection.com. From £67,200 for exclusive, seven-night use of the estate for 10 people (sleeps 20)

BEST FOR EUROPEAN CRAFTS

GAIRNSHIEL LODGE, CAIRNGORMS

This 18th-century hunting lodge, set in a heathery valley near the confluence of the River Gairn and River Dee on the vast Invercauld Estate, was taken over by a family of low-profile Belgian billionaires. Gainshiel has been painstakingly revamped in a pared-down European style – furniture is mid-20th-century classic, often in dark, matte tones, offset by intriguing, eclectic vintage pieces such as the gorgeous reclaimed wardrobes, with hand-forged nails as knobs, by Belgian dealer-designer Joris Van Apers. All eight rooms are similarly lovely, though they vary considerably in size; and the social spaces are at once smart and cosy, while the kitchen gives the entire place a wonderful sense of groundedness and warmth. The shooting is excellent in the right season but the estate is blissfully quiet the rest of the time, its gently undulating, picturesque hills perfect for exploring on foot or by bicycle. Its neighbours include the Queen, the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and Swiss art dealers Manuela and Iwan Wirth. Although an invitation to Balmoral or Birkhall might be too much to hope for, you may well bump into the owners at the butcher's shop in nearby Ballater. And there are the contrasting styles and attractions of the Wirths' astonishing Fife Arms. In terms of its proximity not only to exceptional natural beauty but to assorted royalty, plutocracy and art-world aristocracy, Gairnshiel Lodge might just be one of the hottest houses in the UK right now. The Highlands have not been so chic since the days of Victoria and Albert. STEVE KING +44 7512 246 363; gaimshiellodge.co.uk. From £16,200 for seven nights, including breakfast (sleeps 16)





BEST FOR BUNKER HUNKERING

THE PUMP STATION, KENT

They call it Britain's fifth quarter: the shingle expanse of Dungeness on the Kent coast, a nature reserve and pharmacopeia of plants and occasional houses wrought from Victorian railway carriages, all jutting from flint, glittering with rain and Channel tides under pewter skies. A vast nuclear power station dominates the promontory – neither Rivendell nor Mordor, it's something in between, twinkling mythically through the long evenings. No trees obscure the view from the Pump Station. It is a Delphic, one-storey curiosity; a poured-concrete cube that was used for a covert D-Day project during World War II. Converted by interior architect Fiona Naylor and her photographer husband, it retains its utilitarian façade, but with immense windows at the back, hugged by Corten steel. It seems to float in its setting; unlike Derek Jarman's famous shingle garden nearby, here the pebbles, studded with willow shrubs, thistle and borage, stretch into infinity, turning to silhouettes as the sun clammers down the sky.

Before dusk, a dusty ruby glow surges through the windows. The 108-square-metre space inside is mostly open-plan oak and original arched-concrete beams, with three bedrooms and two bathrooms.

Part beach hut, part bunker, it is peaceful, warm as toast; fabrics are the colours of coastal plants, bird's eggs and stone. Looking from a distance – the sea is 10 minutes' walk away, and the nearby Dungeness Snack Shack, selling just-caught-lobster rolls – you notice how the steel has oxidised to the shade of russet lichen, and that the original pebbledash rhymes, sublimely, with the shingle. ANTONIA QUIRKE+44 1227 464 958; mulberrycottages.com. From £900 for three nights (sleeps eight)



BEST FOR OFF-BEAT COUNTRY KICKS

BLEDINGTON BARN, OXFORDSHIRE

What do you get when Catherine Chichester, formerly of Christie's auction house, turns a Cotswolds cowshed into a cosy, modern cottage? The answer isn't just a fine piece of alliteration, but a stay full of surprise. There are aspects of this 300-year-old stone barn, which was renovated in 2008 with the initial intention of hosting visiting family members, that follow a certain thread: original beams and doors; rustic ladders turned into towel rails; a large painting of a cow. Upstairs in the church-like space, the three bedrooms – heavy on upcycled wood – look out beyond the house's garden and a little stream. But the real fun of Bledington Barn is where it goes left-field. The light-flooded, brick-paved living area in the open-plan ground-floor space is overlooked by a Buddha-head statue peering down from the mezzanine. On one wall hangs an 18th-century *suzani*, an embroidered tribal rug from Central Asia; on another, a contemporary spaniel painting that is just the right side of kitsch, but might nevertheless raise Chipping Norton eyebrows. This place feels personal rather than designed for beige safety. The kitchen could be the setting for a rustic cookery show, with its Gaggenau oven and hamper packed with prosecco from Lady Carole Bamford's nearby Daylesford Organic Farm. But the barn is also deep in gastropub territory, with Bledington's 16th-century King's Head Inn, named Britain's best in *The Good Pub Guide 2018*, just a stumble away, as well as the famed offerings in Kingham, a bracing two miles north. This is the Cotswolds at its quirkiest and most fun.

FRANCESCA BABB +44 20 8740 3097; beachspoke.com

From £2,014 for seven nights (sleeps six)

BEST FOR SEASIDE STAYS

EDEN HALL COTTAGE, NORFOLK

Arriving at this flint-stone building, near Bacton Beach on Norfolk's north-eastern curve, is like approaching the schoolmaster's house. The cottage, first constructed in the 18th century, was once part of a boarding school. But inside a different scene emerges: less serious institute, more modern Montauk beach hangout, filled with space and sunlight, in neutral indigos and Edwardian greys. Vicky White, who converted the house with her husband Chris, runs Plum & Ashby, which trades not only in seaweed-and-sapphire candles and pomegranate body washes, but also a certain post-*Kinfolk* aesthetic, treating its near-30,000 Instagram followers to greyscale kitchens and cute photographs of Bertie, the couple's fox terrier. It was when out walking Bertie that the Whites found the building on a relatively undiscovered stretch of Norfolk coast, somewhere between elegant Holkham and the pleasure-beach scene of Great Yarmouth. They knocked down internal walls while retaining some wonky floorboards and beams, eventually opening the five-bedroom spot to guests last year. Now, it is curated but understated: salt-battered oars in the living room; column radiators and brushed-brass fittings. The kitchen, once three pokey rooms, is barn-like with under-floor heating. Marshmallow-soft sofas welcome dogs as readily as hygge-peddling influencers; children can get lost in the house, if not on expeditions to see seals on the beach at Horsey Gap, or to the curious lighthouse at Happisburgh. Other than Plum & Ashby hand wash, the connection is inferred. Nonetheless, the vibe here is that of a very 2019 lifestyle brand planting a flag in this unlikely location.

PAULA MAYNARD edenhallnorfolk.co.uk. From £1,100 for seven nights (sleeps 10)

PHOTOGRAPHS: NICK ISDEN





BEST FOR FAMILIES

SEREN MOR, PEMBROKESHIRE

On first approach, especially on a dark Friday night, it's hard to tell that Seren Mor is a house; from behind, it could just be a forgotten slab of Welsh industrial concrete. However, the inside is all timber and views, with terraces wrapping around the two storeys, meaning that each of the five bedrooms has its own space for gazing at the Newport estuary panorama. In the guestbook, everyone writes about the light, and there is indeed something magical about the way it dances on the tidal sands. Horses canter at sunrise and dog walkers brace mid-morning winds; come dusk, the workaday city of Newport, on the other side of the water, fades gently from view. The team behind this project, which has received a Royal Institute of British Architects award, clearly designed it for family life, down to the minutest detail. The walnut-wood, open-plan kitchen has drawers for everything – spice jars have their own slots, and there's even a filing cabinet for chopping boards. Book shelves are neatly stacked with Evelyn Waugh titles and compendiums of bird names; the Xbox and board games such as Risk are beautifully tucked away. A welcome hamper includes local bacon so thick it would be classed as gammon in England. The beach is just a few steps down the steep garden, past waiting kayaks, an intriguing stained-glass window and a boat house, and onto the miles of sand that stretch and recede with the pull of the moon. Because this sweep of South Wales coast has never quite had the reputation of the west or the north, a stay Seren Mor feels like uncovering secret treasure.

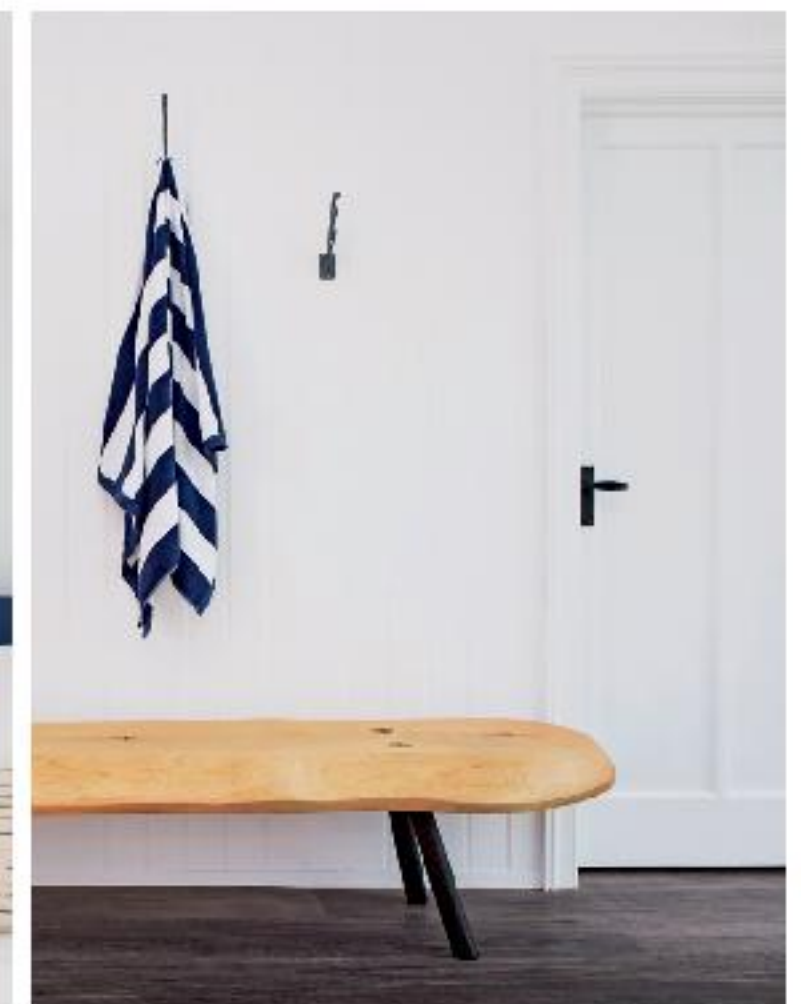
BECKY LUCAS +44 1637 881 183; uniquehomestays.com.

From £2,395 for six nights (sleeps 10)

BEST FOR INTERIORS SHOPPING

BEACH HOUSE BRANCASTER, NORFOLK

The driftwood and razor-clam shells of Brancaster, that great expanse of North Norfolk sand, are a 20-minute walk away from this beach house, yet it seems as if they follow you into its gallery-like, whitewashed space. A sculptural floor light in the mezzanine entrance hall is built into washed-up wood; at the foot of the stairs, there's a shimmering artwork of donkey-ear shells; on the kitchen walls there are nostalgic seaside photographs, including one of Great Yarmouth's Britannia Pier café. The house is the creation of Davina Barber, who left a career as an art dealer in London to return home to the East Anglian county and start Norfolk By Design, an agency championing local artists and makers. The Beach House is its manifestation: almost everything can be bought, in line with a wider global trend for shoppable stays (see page 99). A house filled with regional art could spell kitsch danger, but the prevailing sense is of playfulness and taste; in the living room, a baby-blue, abstract line drawing by photographer Harry Cory Wright is eminently buyable, as is Frank Falvey's wonky ash bench and the reissued Seaweed wallpaper in the master bedroom, first designed by Edward Bawden in 1927. But, more than an exhibition, the five-bedroom pad is a family home-from-home, with cheeky children's bedrooms and a kickabout-ready walled garden. A hamper of goodies from nearby Creake Abbey food hall (sea-salt chocolate brownies, Norfolk Kiwi ale) provides sustenance for coastal-path walks through salt marshes and reed beds, spying oyster catchers on the way to the wide beach. A move to Norfolk's salty wilds may end up being as tempting as a piece of art. PAULA ELLIS +44 7967 369 573; beachhousebrancaster.com. From £1,500 for seven nights (sleeps 10)





PHOTOGRAPHS: DAVID CURRAN FOR UNIQUE HOME STAYS; MARTIN MORRELL

BEST FOR FEASTING

THE BUNNY, OXFORDSHIRE

Before bare-brick walls, pearly soft furnishings and locavorism became ubiquitous, there was Daylesford organic farm near Kingham, which opened a little shop in 2002. It has since become an empire of deli-café, spas, clothing and body lines, and spoon-whittling workshops – all manna for the Chipping Norton set. But owner Lady Carole Bamford is now just as well known for the Wild Rabbit, the Daylesford-served gastropub with rooms in the village itself, which has gained Michelin rosettes and spawned imitators since opening in 2013. Now, the Wild Rabbit has opened five cottages. Across the road at the Bunny – there's also the Dove, Robin, Little Owl and Lark – the connection is instant: not just that signature creaminess, but the organic milk in the fridge, the home-made flapjacks beside the Aga, the Bamford bath products in the bathroom. Stairs with branches for spindles lead up to two beamed bedrooms, with views onto a lavender-edged garden. The living room, with its open fire, cowhide rugs and cashmere throws, is tailor-made for a certain kind of soft-focus cosiness. Outside, Kingham is the Cotswolds in distillate form: all stone and thatch with just one shop but two big-hitting gastropubs (the other, the Kingham Plough, is still excellent despite The Fat Duck alum Emily Watkins selling up) and Alex James's cheese farm. The nearby villages of Stow-on-the-Wold and the Slaughters are dreams of England. Like the Bunny, they're either too perfect, or just perfect enough. FB +44 1608 658 389; thewildrabbit.co.uk. From £400 per night for two nights minimum, including breakfast (sleeps four)