

Scandi-style island retreat

First-time selfbuilders James and Anna Reader designed their Hebridean hideaway for health and well-being, relying on a trusted team to build the coastal property during the pandemic.

STORY: DEBBIE JEFFERY PICTURES: UNIQUE HOME STAYS

“I’ve been completely obsessed with the Western Isles since I was a child, because of their culture and beautiful beaches,” says James Reader. “When I first visited the Isle of Harris, I discovered spectacular scenery and incredible beaches, surpassing even those of the Caribbean.”

In the Western Isles – also known as the Outer Hebrides – Harris is an island of contrasts, with vast expanses of white sand, while the north and east are rugged, rocky places with a lunar landscape.

James introduced his wife, Anna, to the Isle of Harris, and the couple determined to find somewhere which would serve as both a family bolthole and a holiday rental, remaining occupied all through the year.

With a passion for hunting out unusual properties and giving them a new lease of life, the Readers were excited to discover an unprepossessing prefab for sale on a stunning plot above the shores of Luskentyre Beach.

“It was a remarkable chance, because we’d originally made an offer on another house by the beach,” says James. “Our sealed bid was rejected and we were feeling down in the dumps, as we’d travelled up with friends to be there. Then we got talking to a local when we stopped for coffee from a kiosk, and discovered that they were planning to sell their own cottage on the beach, just 600m down the road.”

The rectangular prefabricated holiday home had been constructed in the late 1990s and was relatively basic, with night storage heaters and tiny windows offering restricted views of the sea. Excited by the incredible location, the Readers viewed and later purchased the property.

SETTING
Settled above the shores of Luskentyre Beach on the Isle of Harris, this contemporary house was designed for relaxation and well-being.

“It’s a relatively small plot, but that doesn’t matter when you see what it overlooks.”

IN BRIEF

PROJECT New build
LOCATION Isle of Harris
COST £,380,000
SPENT £1.1m
VALUE £1.57m

Solas is available for holiday rental – Unique Homestays: uniquehomestays.com



"We planned to demolish the existing building and replace it with a new house, designed to make the most of the view," says Anna, who was pregnant during the project with son Arlo, now eight months old. "It was probably the worst possible time to be taking on a remote build, with the repercussions of Brexit and the start of the pandemic, especially as travel was banned and we live in West Sussex."

James is a pilot, with a Piper PA-46 Malibu light aircraft, who can usually fly the family and their two dogs from their Sussex home to the remote Scottish island, but the onset of Covid restricted movement and meant that the couple needed to rely heavily on their trusted team to create a contemporary Scandi-style holiday home designed for health and well-being.

"When I sold my business a few years ago, we invested in a portfolio of holiday properties, starting with an old signal station on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall," James explains. "We enjoy renovating buildings but had never previously tackled a new build, so the Harris project was particularly challenging."

Chartered surveyor Malcolm Crute has over 30 years' experience in the construction industry and is based in Stornoway, the capital of both Harris and the neighbouring Isle of Lewis. His company, MJC Design, has an excellent reputation in the area and this allowed James and Anna to submit an adventurous application, investing over £1m to build a replacement house on the plot – a bold proposal for what had at one time been a simplecroft.

"We paid £380,000 for the original holiday cottage, and briefly considered working with what was there by extending and renovating," says Anna. "After thinking it through, though, we realised that compromising by using the existing framework would really tie our hands."

Instead, the couple gained planning consent for a striking detached three-bedroom replacement dwelling of 200 sqm, which blends into the rocky landscape when viewed from the beach. One of the bedrooms has been located on the ground floor, and the interior



INTERIORS

The open-plan interior has been designed to take advantage of the views. A rotating wood burner stands in the first-floor living room, which opens through full-height glazing to a covered balcony.

EXTERIOR

The new house has rendered side-walls to the ground floor, with distinctive charred larch cladding on the upper timber-framed sections, and a zinc roof.



layout changed and evolved over time, creating numerous spaces from which to enjoy the view.

The new house has been designed so that almost every window, terrace and balcony benefits from south-west orientation towards the estuary's turquoise water, to enjoy the ever-changing Hebridean palette of colours. When the tide is out, stretches of white sand, pooled with water, are exposed.

"We didn't want the maintenance worries of a large garden, and it's a relatively small plot, but that doesn't matter when you see what it overlooks," says James of the sweeping views, which include the hills of north Harris to the rear.

Building company Ardmore Point was chosen for the project, and director Stuart Mitchell managed the process, using mainly island-based trades. "We really wanted to contribute to the local economy and received an extensive list of all the people involved," says Anna.

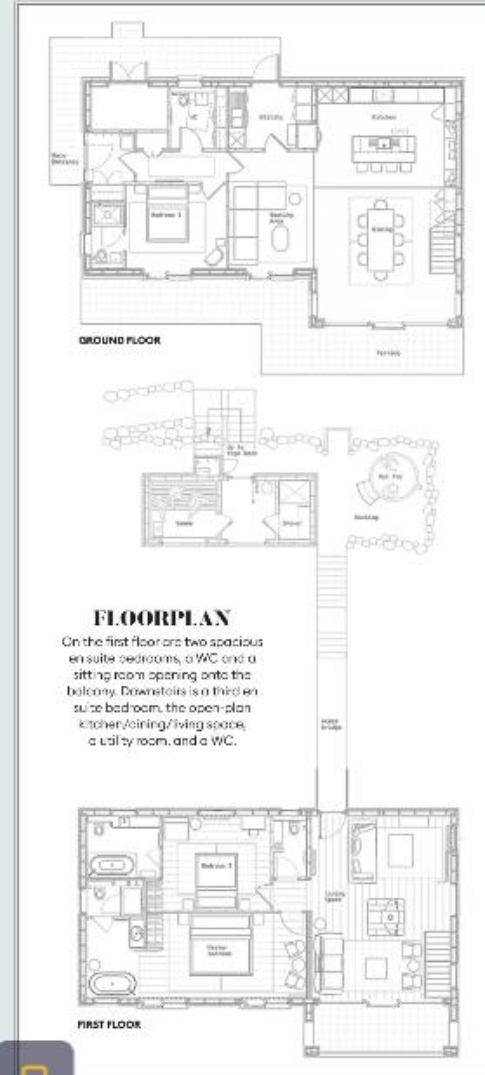
The planning process had been remarkably swift, with designs approved in just eight weeks, and then the site needed to be cleared before work could begin on the new property.

"We decided that rather than just pulling down the old house for landfill we'd offer it to the local community," says Anna. "Opening it up for anyone to take whatever they wanted meant that people could help themselves, and almost everything went."

Excavation, earth movement and levelling proved challenging on the compact plot, especially as a second timber-framed building was later constructed.

The build

The house is built on bedrock and framed in timber and steel, with rendered blockwork to the ground floor. Sourcing materials was difficult because of Covid, and access to the site was restricted along a lane. The local trades worked hard to ensure a smooth build, despite the weather.



FLOORPLAN

On the first floor are two spacious ensuite bedrooms, a WC and a sitting room opening onto the balcony. Downstairs is a third ensuite bedroom, the open-plan kitchen/dining/living space, a utility room, and a WC.



UPPER DECK

A bridge behind the main house leads up to a sauna block, hot tub and yoga deck, positioned to capture the view.



further up the hill. As a former holistic therapist, it was important to Anna that the house should offer space for relaxation and well-being and this sauna block, with a bar area, hot tub and yoga deck, connects to the main house via a bridge and steps.

Built on bedrock, both structures are framed in timber and steel, with rendered blockwork to the ground floor of the main house. The upper storey has been clad externally in distinctive and dramatic charred larch, which should prove maintenance free and endure the coastal climate.

Windows and glazing are framed in aluminium to withstand the elements and, with so much south-facing glass, air conditioning was introduced in several rooms.

"We would have loved the balcony balustrades to have been just simple sheets of glass, to enjoy uninterrupted views," says James. "But these needed to be lined with heavy-duty stainless steel trims to make them storm-proof and to meet Building Regulations so we also had to install stainless steel safety railings in front of balcony windows in the bedrooms."

Sourcing materials proved difficult during the build, and access to the site was restricted along a lane, but the team of island-based trades all knew one another and worked hard as a team to ensure things ran smoothly.

"We'd already started the process when we realised that we needed more help with a project of this scale," says Anna. "We approached Sussex-based interior design company, Studio 9 Design, who we've worked with before, and they elevated the interiors to a whole new level, creating spaces with the modern Scandi feel we love."





STAIRS
The steel staircase rises up beside a double-height window with a perforated panel casting light and shadows.



KITCHEN
Flackered steel has been used in the kitchen as splashbacks to the Ikea cabinets. Concrete coloured resin flooring and pale oak joinery ensure the space has a bright Scandi feel.



BEDROOMS & BATHROOMS
There is one king-sized bedroom on the ground floor and two further bedrooms upstairs, all with en suite bathrooms. Handmade soft furnishings, including headboards, beds and cushions, were conceived by Studio 9 Design.



Unable to attend site meetings, the Readers kept in touch with everyone via Zoom and emails, Pinterest boards and pictures. "We had to rely heavily on trust," says Anna. "Everything was thrown at us, including extreme weather conditions and gale force winds. It's a miracle that we have such a wonderful house at the end of it, and a testament to the people who made it happen."

IN DETAIL

- PROJECT**
Design: MJC Design & Inspection: nicolas@mjcdesign.co.uk
Builder: Ardmore Point, 0111 466 4200
- Interior designer:** Studio 9 Design: studio9design.co.uk
- STRUCTURE**
Windows and glazing: [williamson.co.uk](http://www.williamson.co.uk)
Charred larch cladding: Carbon By Design: [carbonbydesign.co.uk](http://www.carbonbydesign.co.uk)
Bespoke staircase, kitchen panels etc: Studio 9 Design: studio9design.co.uk
- FIXTURES & FITTINGS**
Kitchen: When Kitchens: [whenkitchens.com](http://www.whenkitchens.com)
Music system: Sonos: [sonos.com](http://www.sonos.com)
Wood-burner: Brook & Co: [brookandco.co.uk](http://www.brookandco.co.uk)
Sanitaryware: Villeroy & Boch: [villeroy-boch.co.uk](http://www.villeroy-boch.co.uk)
- Bath (main bedroom):** Hurlingham: [hurlinghambaths.co.uk](http://www.hurlinghambaths.co.uk)
Bath (bedroom 2): Villeroy & Boch: [villeroy-boch.co.uk](http://www.villeroy-boch.co.uk)
Micro-topping (bathroom walls): [leadwork.com](http://www.leadwork.com)
Concrete coloured resin flooring (bath): [boutetflooring.co.uk](http://www.boutetflooring.co.uk)
Tiles: Mandarin Stone: [mandarinstone.com](http://www.mandarinstone.com)
Internal timber wall cladding, wooden flooring: Ruesswood: [ruesswood.co.uk](http://www.ruesswood.co.uk)
Kitchen worktop: Dekton: [deltapoint.com](http://uk.deltapoint.com)
Radiators: Livinghouse: [livinghouse.co.uk](http://www.livinghouse.co.uk)
Feature lighting supply: Twentytwentyone: [twentytwentyone.co.uk](http://www.twentytwentyone.co.uk)
Sauna: Finmark Sauna: [finmarksauna.com](http://www.finmarksauna.com)

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FINAL WORD

What were the high points of the project?
The first time we ever climbed up to the observation deck and took in the jaw-dropping view was a special moment, as was sliding open the huge glass doors in the kitchen/dining room.
...and the low points?
Not being able to visit the site during the pandemic felt disconcerting, and the tug of war between design and practicality was hard. The building must withstand the toughest conditions imaginable, and therefore our design was compromised at times in order to meet Building Regulations.



Your best buy?
The bath tub and micro-tapping in the bathrooms. Our lighting is exceptional too.
Biggest extravagance?
Probably the bespoke staircase, which is such a prominent feature.
Top tip?
Patience is a virtue.