

Richard and Sally opted for a slate roof for their Great Bernera hideaway but chose a more commonly used corrugated roof for the porch and external storerooms

WHERE EAGLES DARE

After decades of holidaying on the Isle of Lewis, Richard and Sally Norman built their own haven in the Hebrides, on a remote shoreline spot frequented by golden eagles

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Non-divers might not realise that the underwater scenery off the west coast of the Isle of Lewis is some of the best you'll find anywhere. Subaquatic mountains, gin-clear water and abundant sea life – lobsters, seals, basking sharks – all make for fantastic scuba diving. 'We started coming here in 1993 and it is so good we kept coming back,' says Richard Norman, who first got hooked on the marine pursuit at university. Above sea level, the Hebridean landscape, intriguing uninhabited islands and white-sand beaches prompted Hertfordshire-based Richard and his wife Sally to take family holidays on Lewis for 20 years. Sally, who, like Richard, works in finance, says she had a choice of joining in the fun beneath the waves or becoming a diving widow. 'Our two children are grown up now, but when they were small, they loved being in wetsuits, on the beach, or in the sea with the dogs, messing about on boats,' she recalls. 'They had tremendous freedom here.' Idyllic family holidays involved fishing for mackerel, cooking over an open fire on the beach, lobster potting, crabbing and scalloping. 'We came up with other diving families and in-laws and had a fantastic time, but years of renting was wearing thin,' Sally explains. 'We started looking for the ideal house to buy, but anything remotely suitable would have needed so much work it wasn't economically viable.'

STARTING FROM SCRATCH

They decided to start from scratch and, about a decade ago, began scouting for building plots on the island instead. Eventually, they found a waterside site on the isle of Great Bernera – a tiny island across a small bridge off the west coast of Lewis. 'We saw a number of other plots but we had a hankering for a sea view, so held out, and bought it in 2007,' Richard adds. The couple's intention was to build a house inspired by the local vernacular: 'We did not want to be modern for its own sake,' Sally says. 'Proportion was a priority in order not to jar with the landscape and we wanted the house to be consistent with the history of the island. However, we did want a contemporary interior.' In the past, houses on Lewis were built for shelter rather than views and often sited to look away from the sea and wind. Historically, there were two styles of property: the long



ABOVE The vivid green backdrop to the kitchen is an emulsion by Dulux called Tarragon Glory 2 **OPPOSITE, CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT** The large picture windows are by a Norwegian company, Janex; the limed oak settle in the hall came from a pine shop in Hertfordshire; almost all the furniture is from Ikea, including the kitchen, the sofas and dining chairs: as its products are flat-packed this made a big difference to the cost of delivery

house and the white house. The white house has dormer windows upstairs and a painted, rendered finish. Long houses, also known as blackhouses, are stone-built, single-storey dwellings, which are one-room deep. Sally and Richard intended to build a white house with the living space upstairs to take advantage of the view. However, planners insisted on an upstairs bathroom, which spoiled their hoped-for layout. By now, it was 2009 and in the wake of the financial crash they put their plans on hold, as uncertainty prevailed. 'We were in limbo for three to four years while we decided if we could afford to go ahead and, if so, whether we could find someone who understood what we were trying to build and help us develop our dream,' they recall. In August 2012, on their annual trip to the Outer Hebrides, they saw an ad in the paper for a new local firm of architects based on the island, Porteous Architecture & Design. ➔➔➔



The partners, Duncan and Fiona, had lived and studied abroad so had a more international perspective. They were happy to work with Richard and Sally's ideas and came up with a couple of very attractive schemes. The pair opted for a simple design based on the long house, with the living areas and master bedroom downstairs and a large wall of glass to enable them to enjoy their stunning view of the water. On the first floor, there are two further bedrooms and a shower room.

Fiona and Duncan managed the whole project on Sally and Richard's behalf, overseeing the main contractors. Structural insulated panel (SIP) construction was chosen for the build because of its thermal properties and the added space the panels provide. For the same amount of insulation, the walls are narrower, giving an extra metre all round of floor space for the same footprint over timber and block.

'On TV, it's always the windows that cause delays and problems,' says Richard. 'It was for us, too. Both of our floor-to-ceiling feature windows fell off the lorry as it rounded a corner while they were being transported across the island. They had to be re-made in Norway and

'WE WANTED THE HOUSE TO BE CONSISTENT WITH THE HISTORY OF THE ISLAND AND TO HAVE A CONTEMPORARY INTERIOR'

ABOVE The table in the dining area came from John Lewis. **OPPOSITE,** CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT The guest bedroom is decorated in whites and pale colours, in keeping with the rest of the house; Harris Tweed cushions add a pretty finishing touch to the Ikea Hemnes bed; the master bedroom is downstairs, enjoying the stunning waterside outlook

the openings were boarded up for months so work could continue inside.' Heating was another challenge. 'We opted for an air source heat pump with underfloor heating downstairs and radiators upstairs,' Richard explains. 'We originally considered a ground source heat pump, but the cost and challenge of drilling through Lewisian 'gneiss' (a type of granite and one of the hardest rocks in the world) quickly changed our minds. A key benefit of an efficient electric system is that we can leave it running in the winter to stop the house freezing, without fear of leaks, fires or running out of fuel.'

Rare birdlife also threatened to delay the build. Golden eagles have nested on the ridge behind the house in recent years and are often seen in the area. Soon after work started, the Normans were told that if the birds nested there during the project that it would be an offence to do anything to disturb them. Luckily, they chose to nest elsewhere that year so





RICHARD AND SALLY'S LEWIS & HARRIS FAVOURITES

- **The Callanish Stones** are a late Neolithic arrangement of standing stones dating from 2900-2600BC. Second only to Stonehenge in size and importance, Callanish is one of many archaeological sites on Lewis (*callanish visitorcentre.co.uk*)
- **Ardroil Beach – Uig Sands** is a huge expanse of white sand and turquoise water. The famous 12th-century Lewis Chess Men, on display at the British Museum and the National Museum of Scotland, were discovered buried in sand dunes nearby in 1831
- **The Harris Tweed Company** opened in 2001 in a warm and cosy building in the village of Grosebay, Isle of Harris (01859 511108, *harristweed.co.uk*)

- **Rarebird Design Studio** makes full use of the natural strength and timeless beauty of Hebridean hand-woven cloth in a range of handbags, accessories and gifts (01851 709974, *rarebirddesign.co.uk*)
- **The Skoon Art Café** in the Bay of Harris sells freshly made cakes, bread and soup and original oil paintings by resident artist Andrew John Craig (01859 530268, *skoon.com*)
- **The visitor centre at The Harris Distillery**, which opened in 2015, is a fellow award-winner. Sally and Richard have invested in a cask of whisky here with friends and are looking forward to offering their very own malt to visitors (01859 502212, *harrisdistillery.com*)

the builders could continue, and Sally and Richard were able to spend their first holiday in the house in June 2014.

IN TUNE WITH NATURE

The finished interior mirrors the surroundings: walls in dove grey and white plus pale wooden surfaces complement the rocky, seashore setting. A vivid-green accent wall in the kitchen is inspired by the ubiquitous moss and sedge grass. Harris Tweed soft furnishings warm up the look. 'We love Harris Tweed and wanted to find one we could use throughout the house, to provide some colour while also linking to the landscape. We found a black-and-green herringbone, in the contemporary style we were aiming for, which we used for cushions and curtains,' Richard says.

The house was always intended to be a holiday home, so they needed furnishings that were hardwearing and practical. 'We worried about the difficulties finding goods that could be delivered to the island and the needs of a holiday rental but the house is developing its own unique character,' says Sally.

The treeless horizon is rugged but you can't help but feel gripped by the drama of the scenery and the charismatic wildlife. 'We see golden eagles most times we visit,' Richard says. 'Sometimes they soar high over the house on thermals looking for potential prey.'

'I've been on the lookout for otters over the past year,' Sally adds. 'I've found plenty of evidence of their holts (burrows), but haven't yet spotted any out and about. Quite often when we're out in our boat we'll see dolphins, otherwise there are seals, basking sharks and the occasional off-course sunfish in the water.'

Delighted to win a civic architectural award in 2016 for the house, the Norman family could not be happier with their holiday home. 'Our lives have changed now our children are older – we come here more to relax, enjoy lobster fishing, crabbing and barbecues on nearby Bosta Beach,' says Sally. They can gather with friends and family several times a year for quality time in a place designed to suit them perfectly. As Sally says: 'It is a home from home.'

🌊 **Loch View, Bernera, is available to let at lewisholiday.co.uk. For Porteous Architecture & Design, see porteousarchitecture.co.uk. coast travelled with [Flybe.com](http://flybe.com) and Car Hire Hebrides (carhire-hebrides.co.uk).**

OPPOSITE, TOP Numerous coves and stunning bays can be found at every turn on this magical island
OPPOSITE, BELOW The Normans wanted a holiday home that would fit around their love of the outdoors
THIS PAGE, FROM TOP Any excuse and the Norman family head out in a boat; Sally's sister, brother-in-law and 10-year-old nephew, Fergus, are frequent visitors, and they love donning wetsuits to take on the Atlantic breakers

