



going green

A CLUSTER OF ECO-FRIENDLY HOLIDAY HOMES WITH A NATURAL SWIMMING POOL MAKES A PEACEFUL CORNISH RETREAT

Words by **Alice Westgate**, photographs by **James Ram/westcountryphotographers.com**



Imagine a wish list of eco-friendly features for your home. Renewable energy and a nice big veggie plot are likely to appear. You might also add an orchard, a willow arbour or even a natural swimming pool.

Believe it or not, all of these – plus a nuttery, a wildlife pond, a chamomile throne, an owl house and a 12-acre nature reserve – can be found at Little White Alice, a recently-completed cluster of luxury holiday cottages near Stithians.

The story began four years ago when accountant Simon Toft bought a rundown farm called Little White Alice, and its accompanying outbuildings, in 25 acres of land near Carnmenellis. “My vision at the outset was to do something sustainable,” he says. But boosted by the creative drive of his partner, artist Rosie Hadden, the broad scope of the scheme took shape. And now, after two years

of hard graft, Little White Alice is open for business.

The new development sticks to the footprint of the original farm, which was a mix of stone-walled dwellings and metal-roofed outbuildings: “The design combines cedar cladding and original stonework and was popular with the planners because it retained a somewhat agricultural feel,” says Simon.

Simon’s numerical wizardry kept the scheme financially viable, while Rosie’s flair for creativity (she can turn her hand to anything from textiles to printmaking) brought the interiors to life. Though the pair project-managed the development themselves, expert advice came from local green building guru Robin van der Bij, of Ecohouse. “Our combined skills made the project surprisingly un-stressful,” says Rosie. All the hard work has certainly paid off because Quality in Tourism recently gave The Oak

House, the largest of the cottages, a Five-Star Gold award, the highest one possible.

Little White Alice, which is named after a local tin mine called Whit Allis, is self-sufficient for water and power. Two 90-metre bore holes were driven down into the granite to extract heat via a ground source heat pump; this is then fed to each cottage via insulated pipes. Hot water, meanwhile, comes from solar thermal panels on the roofs, and there is also a wind turbine to provide electricity. There is also an impressive array of insulation (mostly recycled newspaper), plus triple-glazed windows and heat recovery systems to re-use warm air.

Each of the six cottages also has its own wood burning stove, but even these have impressive green credentials: “We have planted more than 1,000 trees around the site so that in ten years’ time, when we start coppicing, →

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we will have our own supply of firewood," says Simon. "All guests are invited to offset the carbon footprint of their journey by planting further trees around the plot," adds Rosie.

Each house is filled with paintings by Cornish artists such as Krista Taylor and Paula Berks, and all the kitchens are handmade by local woodworkers Odile Kipling and Sean Stanford. There are also willow bedheads woven by Lin Lovekin and glass splashbacks made by Jane Smith – both Cornish craftspeople. Meanwhile, all the cushions, curtains and throws were woven by Eddie Doherty in Donegal.

Perfectly in keeping with all this is the natural swimming pool, where guests can swim all year round. The temperature is generally higher than you would guess, partly due to the heat-gathering nature of the black liner, and partly because it is relatively shallow (around 1.5 metres at the deepest point). Rosie has been known to take a dip here in the dead of winter: "I could hear the ice forming around me," she laughs.


The pool was designed and installed by Mid Cornwall Landscaping. "It fits in perfectly with the ethos at Little White Alice because it has no chlorine," says manager Chris Plant. "It is constructed using a minimum amount of concrete and the water is biologically filtered through friendly bacteria."

Many enormous granite boulders are incorporated into the organically shaped design. One huge, naturally dish-shaped rock forms a waterfall at one end, while flat slabs make steps for swimmers to enter and leave the water at the other. "We were lucky enough to have all these on site to

start with," says Simon. "So we didn't have to bring in any new materials. Moving them into place around the pool was quite a job, though," he admits.

An area along one side, known as the regeneration zone, is planted with reeds: "A pump draws water up through it and returns cleaned water back into the pool," says Chris. "There is also a skimmer to remove any debris from the surface. All this means the nutrient level in the water is very low, which is necessary if the water quality is to be maintained. Only certain plants will deal with that - irises, reeds, wild mint and forget-me-not are perfect."

The water is a draw not just for holidaymakers, but also for swallows that swoop and dive across the surface in summer, testament to the fact that it is totally in harmony with its surroundings.

Beside the pool is a green oak arbour with a gently curved sedum roof and views over the surrounding countryside. This is a licensed venue for weddings and civil ceremonies, and the first marriage took place here earlier this summer. Who were the happy couple? Rosie and Simon, of course. 

INFORMATION

- ▶ Little White Alice, www.littlewhitealice.co.uk, tel 01209 861000, e-mail enquiries@littlewhitealice.co.uk. Prices start at £220 per week for a two-person cottage.
- ▶ Mid Cornwall Landscaping Ltd, www.mc-landscaping.co.uk, tel 01726 884040.

