



THIS LIFE

Stef Burgon and Simon Hunt

The 16th-century Kilmartin Castle in Argyll has been restored by this enterprising couple, who have filled it with treasures from their world travels and turned it into a boutique B&B

Photography Suzie Lowe
Art direction Gillian Welsh
Words Catherine Coyle



“I think it was Maya Angelou who said, ‘People will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.’” Australian-born Simon Hunt and Stef Burgon, who is originally from Newcastle, are recounting how they came to be living in a castle on the west coast of Scotland. They met in Dubai around seven years ago, having both moved there for work. Stef was presenting a breakfast radio show and working as a travel journalist and Simon, creative director at an ad agency – though he always had other ‘schemes’ on the go, as his dad used to say. For instance, he set up a sandboard company, ABOVE sandboards, in Dubai. Sandboarding, if you’ve never come across it, is like snowboarding, only on dunes rather than down snow-clad mountains. When Simon first tried it, he was handed a snowboard to ride. “I couldn’t believe that in a country covered in sand, no one had made a board specifically for this sport,” he recalls.

He set to work, coming up with a prototype, went into production and sold a thousand in his first year. His board designs are currently the fastest-selling sandboards in the world.

Like the entrepreneurial Simon, Stef isn’t one to sit still. It’s one of the reasons the pair get ▶

[Previous pages] Stef and Simon host breakfast at Kilmartin Castle using as much home-grown produce as they can. The concrete kitchen worktops were poured in situ and give a modern edge to the room against the original stone of the thick castle walls. The hanging unit over the island is by Falmec Spazio, sourced in Italy. [Above] Tucked in a nook where a cooker used to be are church pews rescued from the local church. The dining table was salvaged from a London pub. [Left] The cinema lightbox used to hang in a Birmingham picture house. [Opposite, left] Vintage Sadler teapots were spotted on a trip to Leith and the couple invested in some for their B&B. The photograph is by Abbi Kemp. [Opposite right] Kilmartin is run as a boutique B&B but the castle can be hired on an exclusive-use basis. With sustainability high up on the agenda, breakfast options depend on what’s in season



on so well – their voracious appetite for life is intoxicating. “I think we were in Dubai at the right time,” she remarks. “It’s not the same now, but when we were there, budgets were huge and you could dream big and make it happen in your job because the money was there.”

Although they both savoured their time in the Middle East, they also knew that they didn’t want to be there forever. Stef’s spell as a travel broadcaster and writer had given her an unquenchable wanderlust and the couple’s shared love for road trips brought them back to the UK, first to England to catch up with her family, then later venturing further north, neither having previously gone beyond Edinburgh.

“We spent three weeks touring around Scotland over Christmas and New Year 2014,” recalls Stef. “All our friends said, ‘No, don’t go in January when it’s all wet and dark and cold,’ but we just fell in love with it. Afterwards, when we were back at work, I think we were both feeling like it was time to do something else.”

What they’d experienced on their road trip was the unspoilt, untapped potential of the country. They had ignored the official tourist route signs and forged their own road, taking in the landscapes, communities, hotels and restaurants that make so much of Scotland such a hidden treasure.

Stef was casually looking at property online when she came across Kilmartin Castle. The idea of buying it was a bit of a pipe dream (“I’m an Australian – I didn’t know you could just buy a castle,” laughs Simon), but these two felt brave and eager, hankering after new challenges where they didn’t feel hemmed in and could work together and be their own boss.

The castle that had caught their eye is a 16th-century Z-plan tower house. It’s in the historic Kilmartin Glen, between Oban and Lochgilphead, which has the greatest concentration of Neolithic and Bronze Age artefacts in Scotland. There is said to be more than 800 ancient ►

[Top left] A vintage photograph of Kilmartin Castle. **[Bottom left]** The flagstones in the hallway still bear pink chalk numbers from when the couple lifted them to install underfloor heating. Simon’s Harris Tweed jacket is a celebration of all things cool and Scottish. **[Middle]** The banqueting table was made by the castle’s previous owner, Tom Clarke. Above it is a ‘living’ light installation by Love Dove Studio. The stonework had been left in an excellent state of repair, and gives the dining room a cosy and inviting atmosphere. **[Right]** Assorted decanters collected on European antique-hunting expeditions



monuments within a six-mile radius, including standing stones, burial sites and carvings.

“Once the seed had been planted, we did a lot of research, even sending my parents on a recce trip,” admits Stef. “The buying process went to sealed bids – I remember we upped our bid at the last minute, putting in a weird number in the hope that it would work in our favour. Then, when Simon hung up the phone, a bird crapped on his shoulder!”

Superstitious or not, luck was on their side and they secured their dream home. Initially, they could only take two weeks off to get the castle in working order before listing it on Airbnb and heading back to work in Dubai, leaving it to tick over as a basic holiday rental. They knew, though, that they had to do it justice, so, after a couple of years, they tied up their jobs in the Middle East, sold their belongings and moved into a van in the garden to allow them to properly renovate the castle. They ripped out the interior and put it back together properly, turning it into a five-bedroom boutique B&B.

They are both self-confessed collectors so they had a stockpile of antiques, furniture, artwork and vintage pieces that they’d bought on trips all over the world, from flea markets in France ▶



[Opposite] Stef and Simon were keen to leave as much of the stonework exposed as they could to show the layers of history. Simon built the window seat that has been warmed up with a sheepskin from Skyeskyns. The oversized mirror came from Nottingham’s Newark Fair and shows how mixing different periods can help to tell a story. [Above] Persian rugs in the grand hall from the Blue Souk in Sharjah create a warm ambience where guests can listen to some vinyl while they have a dram in front of the fire. The clown painting is by Aimé van Bellegem. The lantern, found in a Berwick antiques shop, belonged to a ship that sailed out of Newcastle upon Tyne, Stef’s home town



[Opposite, top] The 'Snug' on the ground floor has a barrel-vaulted ceiling and arrow-slit windows. The oak door was repurposed from elsewhere in the castle. Simon got the runners from a US dealer and hung them to create a sliding door into the en-suite. [Opposite, bottom] Stef cuts fresh herbs to add to guests' breakfasts. [Left] Claire Henry ceramics were commissioned for the bathrooms as a way to reduce plastic waste. [Below] 'Speel' is a second-floor kingsize bedroom up a secret spiral staircase. It has a vaulted ceiling and lots of natural light, showing off the upcycled antique bed reupholstered by Sheelagh Leslie using Linwood's Aden Monkey Puzzle fabric. The artwork propped against the wall is by street artist INSA





SNAP CHAT WITH STEF AND SIMON

and churches in Belgium to American online auctions, as well as bits they'd hung onto from their studio in Dubai. They're handy too, so lots of off-cuts from jobs at the castle were transformed into new pieces, such as handcrafted shelving or trivets or seating.

Over the course of the seven-month renovation, Stef and Simon did the majority of the work themselves, under the watchful eye of local builder Stuart MacDonald, installing the underfloor heating, re-laying the flagstones, demolishing fake ceilings and painting every single wall. They were careful to respect the castle; where cost-cutting measures jeopardised the integrity of the renovation, they held strong and waited until they could afford to do it properly.

Five years on from their leap into the unknown they're happily ensconced in life at Kilmartin Castle, planning their next adventure in between serving breakfast to their guests and tending the vegetable garden. The whole experience has given them an appetite for more. "We'd love to do it again," they smile. ■

[Above] The castle looks just as good from the outside, with its crow-stepped gable and beautifully curved turret. **[Middle]** The William Holland copper bath is the perfect foil to the custom-mixed Kalklitir paint in the Speel bedroom. The textured effect, reminiscent of the Moroccan technique of tadelakt, ages well and will harmonise as the bath patinates in years to come. The portrait was found in a Danish antiques store. **[Right]** The cross-country skis were picked up at a Russian flea market



Luxury is... Stef: Ha! After living in our van for a year, working on the castle every day, luxury is being able to step into a hot shower whenever I want to. I will never take that for granted again!

How do you invest in yourself? Simon: Making enough time for good breakfasts together every day.

Favourite smell Stef: It's a toss-up between homemade bread in the morning and the smell of a neighbour creosoting their fence in the summer. Simon: Freshly sawn wood is pretty epic. Also up there would be onions frying.

Best place to unwind Stef: In our grand hall with a drink, a roaring fire and a good book. Simon: Sitting in the window seat in the grand hall, whisky in hand, Otis Redding on the record player.

Dream destination Stef: Right now, it's Japan, because I've never been and I really enjoy places that are so completely different to home in terms of culture, language and food. Simon: South America. I'd love if we could spend a few months there, maybe in a camper van, really soaking it in.

Favourite comfort food Stef: I've fallen in love with haggis, neeps and tatties. It is the ultimate comfort food.

Top cooking tip Simon: "That's too much cheese," said no one ever.

Biggest indulgence Simon: Champagne just because it's Saturday afternoon. Copper bathtubs, underfloor heating AND heated towel rails.

Necessity Stef: Good moisturiser. Simon: Good coffee.