

# life

Highland

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>>> WIN!  
A £10,000  
MAKEOVER

house  
beautiful!

*Be seduced by Achnagairn Castle in  
our Top 21 magnificent places to stay*

<plus>

*Meet the north's  
most stylish woman*

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THE TOP 21 MAGNIFICENT HOUSES, HOTELS & HIDEAWAYS

*Achnagairn Castle takes the lead in our trip around...*

# *Scotland's sensational places to stay*

*#1: Achnagairn Castle & lodges, Kirkhill by Beaulieu*

Once upon a time there was an unloved stately pile near Beaulieu. Yes, it had been beautiful, but its mojo was well and truly lost. Then its saviours arrived: Gillian and Michael Lacey-Solymar.

Breathing new life into the faded glory of Achnagairn Castle was never going to be easy, but this quirky, fun-loving pair have transformed it into something exceptional.

The 24-bedroomed shell has been lovingly restored and revamped, with fine furnishings including items from The Savoy in London.

Now firmly established as a unique wedding venue with its glorious ballroom, beautiful exterior and gorgeous grounds, it is also a huge draw for some of the world's biggest brands and competes with the likes of The Gleneagles Hotel to attract the likes of BMW and Louis Vuitton for corporate getaways.

And this year Achnagairn Castle and its lodges will throw their doors open as a hotel for the very first time – and bring an exciting new restaurant to the Highlands, too.

"We now have 62 rooms here," smiles

Gillian. "To have almost tripled the size of the business since 2006 is phenomenal. Whilst the 37 recently refurbished lodge rooms function as individual bedrooms (or can be hired self-catered), the castle has been exclusive-use only until now. But we've taken the step to turn the castle into a hotel for two months this summer. Plus, we're adding a restaurant. All very exciting."

The journey started back in 2002 when a *Sunday Times* 'bargain of the week' caught Mike's eye – a house in Aberdeenshire which





Gillian and Michael Lacey-Solymar have an exciting year ahead at Achnagairn Castle.



The fun-loving pair seem unstoppable in their quest for perfection.



*“We wanted it to be different, unlike any other place”*

became a holiday home for the London-based pair – even though Gillian was dubious “because I’m such a sun bunny”. However, Michael’s childhood summers had been spent in Perthshire and having a bolthole in Scotland was a dream come true, so Gillian’s love affair with Scotland began with Cortes House.

Soon it seemed a logical step to start letting it out. “Then a couple of girls asked if they could have their wedding photos taken in the grounds. And we thought ‘ping’ – weddings!”

It was then the pair began looking for a new venue and found Achnagairn Castle.

“We knew we had a winning formula but felt we needed somewhere a lot bigger and when we saw the ballroom in this place, it was incredible.”

As a well-travelled management consultant, Gillian had had her fill of bland rooms. “You’d wake up not knowing if you were in Frankfurt, Madrid or New York. I thought if ever I had a place I’d want to stamp my personality on it.”

There’s nothing bland about Achnagairn: colours, fabrics and fittings all scream quality.

“The plan was to make it different, unlike any other place,” says Gillian, who

has a passion for interior design. “Some people are going to love it, some people are going to hate it, but nobody’s going to forget it.”

You get the feeling there’s always a project just around the corner for this busy pair.

Despite Gillian’s day job as Senior Teaching Fellow at UCL and Michael’s work on the financial side of medical diagnostics – plus the normal family life having three children brings – the pair zip up from London every three weeks to keep the business moving forwards.

This couple have “worked damned hard” for their money and everything they’ve earned has gone into property, and are refreshingly free of airs and graces. On their frequent trips here they sleep in half-finished rooms, live off Tesco ready meals and still manage to crack a smile.

“I always joke about sleeping around. Same man – different bedroom! With 62 bedrooms we

have to sample each one to feel the atmosphere of the room,” laughs Gillian. “The way Apple’s Steve Jobs was obsessive about every bit working right, we’re a bit like that about our rooms.”

A short walk to the lodges in the castle grounds reveals gorgeous six-bedroomed houses which can be hired in their entirety or on an individual bed and breakfast basis.

“We brought these houses back from the dead,” explains Michael. “A local developer had half-built them, then went bust so we bought them from the bank which had repossessed them.”

The first have been available for a year now, but additional ones have been coming on stream every few months, with each done up to a 5-star standard. The houses, which are so splendid it’s more accurate to call them mini-manors, attract

everything from birthday, hen and stag dos to couples seeking romantic getaways – and will be a mini Olympic-style village for some of the World Orienteering Championship teams in July.

Two more will open soon and a special ‘hush-hush’ suite will open later in the year. Guests can stay either just in a bedroom on a B&B basis, or take the whole house, self-catered, if in a group.

“With so many bedrooms it seemed right to transform one of the properties into a restaurant. It’ll be funky – we’ll have birch trunks on the walls and beautiful Balinese decoration.”

While it’s clear Gillian and Michael know about dazzling design, they’re not kidding themselves about being restaurateurs: “We know what we know – and what we don’t know, so we’re looking for a partner.”

With lots of hungry people in the lodges and veggies from farmer and good friend Simon Fraser just next door, the pair want to provide good honest food in beautiful surroundings.

For a great story and a glamour factor that’s off the scale, Achnagairn’s hard to beat.

“For us,” says Gillian, “bringing something truly beautiful and unique back to life and creating jobs for the area is just fantastic.”

■ For more info on all of Gillian and Michael’s properties go to [www.perfect-manors.com](http://www.perfect-manors.com) or call 0845 057 4212.



The castle is stunning inside and out.



The lodges, which can be hired in their entirety or room by room.



The luxurious lodges don’t disappoint.



Inside what will be the new restaurant, due in June.