

UNUSUAL SELF-CATERING RETREATS



Creative Crear

Its owners describe Crear, a huge converted farmhouse retreat two hours and whole worlds away from Glasgow, as 'space to create'. There's a studio space with a massive plate glass wall offering stunning views across the water to Islay and the Paps of Jura, as well as a range of poetry and live music events. It costs £500 to hire a night, but between 11 of you that's only £45 each. See crear.co.uk.

■ Perfect for: bands or theatre companies looking for inspiration, really special weekend parties, a very memorable New Year.



Top-notch Torridon

Five-star seclusion and luxury on tap at the Torridon Boathouse near Inverness, where you can be at once out in the wilderness but still comfortably near to the AA-rosetted Torridon restaurant and castle hotel, as well as a number of breathtakingly lovely National Trust heritage sites. Costs £750 per week off-peak, see

www.thetorridon.com/boathouse

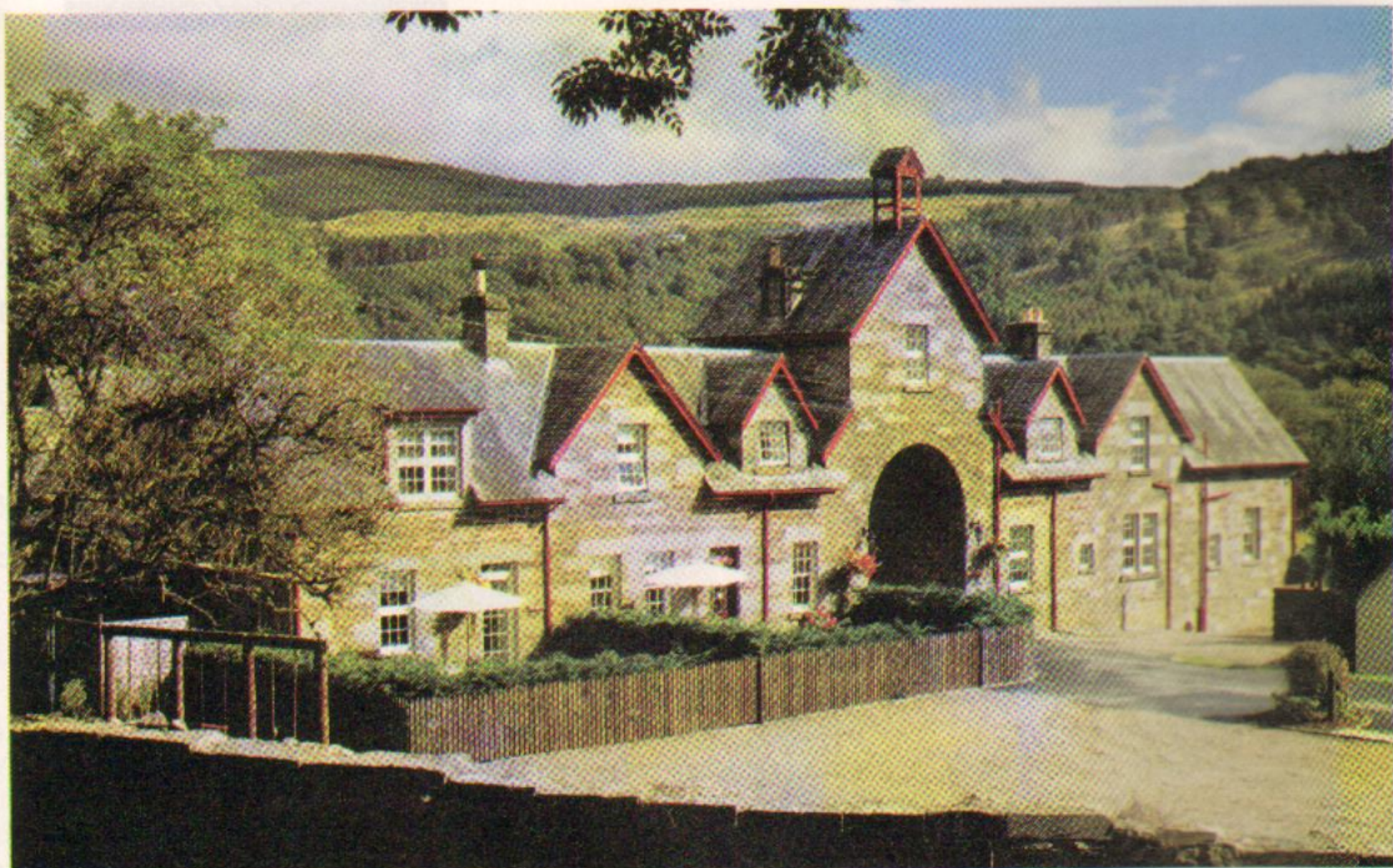
■ Perfect for: smaller parties of gourmands.



Budget Bothy love

The Bothy, a tiny, homey space in Portlethen (near Aberdeen) is a cosy back-to-basics getaway, with a wood-burning stove to keep the chills out, an organic vegetable garden and an outdoor bread oven. Sleeps two, and costs £35-£45 per night. See <http://tiny.cc/kxuhR>

■ Perfect for: couples who want a weekend getaway.



Happy when it rains

Kirstin Innes stands up for Scottish weather, even in the coldest, wettest months, after a weekend break at Mains of Taymouth in Perthshire

Going on holiday in Scotland? In the winter? Ach, you'll have heard the jokes. You might have made some of them yourself. No, it probably won't be that sunny. Or warm. However, as the pound plummets abroad and air fares shoot up, holidaying at home is starting to look like an increasingly sensible option. In fact, the most popular time of year for self-catering rentals across the country is Christmas and New Year, and there are great bargain breaks to be got in January too.

Mains of Taymouth, by the village of Kenmore on the banks of the Tay, is a particularly good example of a new breed of Scottish self-catering holiday development that makes a virtue out of every aspect of the local environment. If the weather's fine, you can go whitewater rafting, horseriding, or Munro-bagging. However, a little bit – or even a lot – of water, as we experienced when we visited, doesn't mean that your visit will end up a total washout. The Taymouth houses, a courtyard circle of beautifully converted old stone farm buildings, really come into their own in particularly bad weather, with crackling log fires and some serious Scottish scenery out of the rain-battered windows, looking good with or without the storm clouds. The cottages, which vary in size from cosy snugs for

couples to party houses that sleep 11, have all been awarded four or five stars by the Scottish Tourist Board, and are pretty much tailor-made for curling up and luxuriating in, at one with the elements, away from the world.

When the rain finally stopped, we took a (well wrapped-up) walk into the village, surrounded by mountains and loch, looking all the more impressive against foreboding skies. Later, we braved the momentary chill of a freezing Perthshire night to take the plunge in the hot tub in our garden — all the cottages have either a hot tub or a spa and sauna, and the cold makes you appreciate them all the more.

The other thing that makes Taymouth stand out from your average self-catering complex is the on-site, and excellent, courtyard deli shop and restaurant, where, again, the owners prove their commitment to getting the most out of local resources. The foodie end of the organisation is presided over by the very affable Jake Schmael, who can usually be found cooking



his own indoor barbeques in the restaurant space, and who has recently introduced his 'Back to Basics' scheme, meaning simplified, wholesome, cleverly-prepared menus using only very local produce, at cheap prices that induce city-slicking jaws to drop.

'I wanted to ensure my restaurant stayed busy and that the local suppliers I've used for years survive the current economic climate,' he tells us. 'Here, we've got access to some of Scotland's finest produce, produce which is revered all over the world and used in the best restaurants: pheasant, partridge, venison and Black-face lamb, all delivered to us straight from the hills.' It's all in keeping with 'cittaslow', a particular totem of the slow food movement. 'Cittaslow urges people to enjoy their food heritage by encouraging appreciation of local produce, and local culture,' he explains. You know, I think he's onto something.

**IT'S
TAILORMADE
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See www.taymouth.co.uk