



Dartmoor Love Nest

Suzy Bennett has transformed an outdated cottage in North Bovey into a showstopping romantic retreat, writes Francesca Smith. Photography by Constantino Leite

Moorland View Cottage was suffering from damp in the walls, death-watch beetle in virtually every piece of wood, outdated storage heaters, woodchip paper and pine everywhere. Two years later, it has been transformed into "a chic country cottage with a French accent," where 80% of Suzy Bennett's guests are metropolitan honeymooners enjoying a high-end, romantic, rural retreat.

Suzy Bennett's plucky determination, extraordinary attention to detail and hard work ethic is reflected in this stunning, Grade II Listed thatched cottage in North Bovey.

Suzy (right) studied journalism in Cornwall, and when she inherited from her grandparents, she put into action her desire to buy somewhere by the sea or deep in the countryside – but it would have to pay for itself.

"I pootled up here one day, having never been to Dartmoor, and honestly thought it was the most beautiful place I

had ever seen – it was just so green," explains Suzy. During her three days of "pretty intensive hunting" she found Moorland View Cottage. "It was perfect. It ticked all the right boxes – manageable size, beautiful village, thatched, fantastic pub (Ring of Bells), great local walks and friendly people."

Originally owned by a psychiatrist who, rumour had it, moved out because he had too many clients locally. Within a couple of hours of picking up the keys, "I was up a ladder in overalls scraping the woodchip off the walls."

But the whole process was far from a smooth ride – it never is!

Suzy admits, "For a good two years, it was the worst time of my life – it was absolutely horrendous." She split up with her boyfriend – a builder and a crucial budgetary factor in the project. So suddenly, "I had to understand and deal with the intricacies of modern plumbing, u-bends, 3-gang light switches, etc. I don't have that kind

of brain. I am far too girly for that sort of thing. There seemed to be a block there and, of course, people spotted that", including the four sets of builders she went through.

"It was partly my fault because I wasn't here. I would basically try to explain everything over the phone, but you really need to be on site every day. I imagined after six months I would be thinking about what cushions to buy!"





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Built in 1705, as a farm worker's (or miner's) cottage, Suzy always hoped to uncover something under the floorboards during the renovations, like an old newspaper, a love letter or a gold coin – but found nothing. "I still gaze at the fireplace and think of 300 years of

inhabitants looking at this fire."

All the original features have been preserved, including oak beams over the fireplaces, stud walls, hooks inside the fireplace for hanging cooking utensils, meat hooks in the hallway and kitchen, and the scrubbed, warm stable-brick

floors. This gave Suzy the traditional heart she craved in a property, which then allowed her to incorporate the luxurious, 21st-century elements to turn it into a truly unique, romantic, rural retreat. Mortenhampstead blacksmith Greg Abel forged many items in the cottage, including the fire irons "which were still warm when I picked them up from the forge," (www.mortenforge.co.uk)

Right from the start, Suzy had a clear design plan. "As a travel journalist, I have stayed in lots of gorgeous boutique hotels and I love the simple style, but I wanted it to have a luxurious feel without it being too sleek and urban – simply comfortable and sophisticated."

The cottage's décor is a real showstopper and Suzy is quick to give credit to a newly set-up interior designer friend in London, Holly Sullivan, who had just "done a brilliant job" on her flat. "Holly has a fantastic flair. She knew my tastes and I trusted her completely. She devoted more than a year into turning the cottage into a blissful retreat," (www.veryholly.com). "The palette is muted with light greys, oysters, sage-green, chocolates and



Through the Keyhole

pastel-pinks, but glammed up with shimmering wallpapers, chandeliers and ornate mirrors," explains Suzy.

Space was a constant challenge and every inch had to work. When a sink couldn't be found small enough to fit the downstairs cloakroom, a metal salad bowl from John Lewis was found to work just as well – great imagination! The reaction of friends to the fitted wardrobe in the main bedroom raised a few eyebrows when Suzy decided to put chicken wire in the panels, backed inside with luscious silk fabric: 'Why do you want it to look so chicken-coopish?' The simple explanation was that the walls needed to breathe because of the damp and it would allow the air to flow. Simple!

Suzy particularly enjoys cooking when she's in Devon because of all the lovely local produce at her fingertips. "People will walk through the village with a brace of pheasants over their shoulder and will go into the pub and swap it for a few pints of beer. It's a lovely kind of barter economy within the village." Her next door neighbour is a



beekeeper whose hives can be seen by the river. "The bees that sip the pollen from flowers in my garden are the same that make his honey."

The handmade kitchen incorporates modern storage techniques to use every conceivable space to store pots and pans, etc, while the deep sills are used to display pretty bowls of flowers. At the far end, the strong granite wall remains uncovered and one of Suzy's favourite items – a big burr oak chopping board bought at a local farmers' market – takes pride of place.

The cottage's main 'wow' factor has

got to be the bathroom. A magnificent vintage copper and tin slipper bath dominates the room like a fairytale coach – a honeymooner's dream. The bathroom wall and door had to be taken down to install the bath and a specially reinforced floor laid underneath. The sink is cleverly sunk into an old chest of drawers with the top drawer cut to half its depth – another useful space preserved.

"It was the views from the main bedroom that really sold it to me," admits Suzy. The moorland view is at its finest here, with acres of open moorland, forests, wild ponies and sheep in the distance and the church spire, village allotments and dozy thatched cottages just outside, framed by a magnificent magnolia in the spring and rambling roses

in the summer. All the window seats are temptingly covered with deep fitted cushions to sit and soak up the views.

Coming up the staircase with its thick, nautical rope handrail, you are lifted by the bright landing with its practical painted floorboards, a sumptuous swag of silk across the window, the shimmering wallpaper and sunburst mirror.

On a pretty table at the top sits the all-essential computer facilities for her metropolitan guests. "I love my gadgets!"

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Even the TV, wi-fi and music in every room has been so subtly incorporated, they are virtually invisible.

There are two entrances to the cottage; the main porch seats have logs stacked under one and a row of different sized Hunter wellies neatly set out under the other. Just inside is a basket full of tennis rackets, cricket bats, lacrosse and walking sticks ready to take down to the public meadow. "There is no street lighting here and at night-time it can be pitch black. Londoners find it a bit dark here. They are not used to it," so hanging on hooks by the back door is a row of sturdy torches.

Even the cosy cottage garden receives the same care and attention as the interior with a garden lighting designer friend creating the romantic, low-lit garden. It was only planted a year ago in a muted colour scheme, with a teardrop shaped lawn, a pond (full of frog spawn in the spring), lavender under the window, a tiny herb patch and honeysuckle, rambling roses and clematis ready to drape over the wall at the end of the garden.

A table and chairs set out on the patio under the sitting-room window is the perfect spot from 11am onwards for al fresco eating and drinking – Suzy can even provide a chef! Love is definitely in the air, at Moorland View. □

www.moorlandview.com

