

Only a very stylish
wolf would climb
down this chimney.

HOUSE OF STRAW

A RURAL HEALTH RETREAT IN DEVON HAS OPTED FOR AN INNOVATIVE, STRAW-PANEL BUILDING SYSTEM TO CREATE ITS VERY OWN CARBON-NEUTRAL ECO-LODGES

WORDS SONIA ZHURAVLYOVA, IMAGES © GUY HARROP

Set deep among the lush rolling hills of North Devon and just a stone's throw from the Atlantic, Yeotown is an award-winning health retreat. Run by Mercedes and Simon Sieff it offers guests a welcome dose of rustic luxury, tranquillity and guaranteed rejuvenation. But what visitors might not realise is that they are actually staying in a house made almost entirely from straw.

After six years of running their business, the Sieffs decided it was high time to expand the 18th century farmhouse by adding two comfortable eco-lodges. The new low-slung, pitched-roofed buildings house five suites, which are

finished to the highest standard, with underfloor heating and power showers as well as a super-suite that has floor-to-ceiling double-height windows and a cosy fireplace. But it's the eco credentials that truly set this development apart. The suites are built from locally sourced carbon-sequestering materials that include straw bales and sustainable timber, which are delivered by Bristol-based manufacturers ModCell. 'It was important for us to find an environmentally friendly way of adding to the property with something that would look in keeping with the old buildings here,' says Simon. ModCell, ♦♦



ModCell's straw constructions won't blow down anytime soon...

- The test house at the University of Bath has withstood a simulation of hurricane-force winds of 120 mph.
- The straw house has a life expectancy of more than 100 years and is designed to be dismantled, re-used and recycled.
- Shorter on-site construction times mean that final costs are lower than a traditionally built house.
- The increased insulation provided by straw can significantly reduce energy bills.
- It takes about seven tonnes of straw to build a three-bedroom house using the ModCell pre-fabrication method.
- Close to four million tonnes of straw goes to waste every year, which could be used to build more than 500,000 new homes.

‘The suites feel very warm, they really hold the heat. We actually added windows later in the build and it was very easy to do this as you just pull the straw out in the right place.’



(above) The lodges are clad in quarried Cornish stone and douglas fir. (right) the interiors are decorated with reclaimed wood, one-off finds and antiques, all helping to create a calm, 'outside in' feel.

which started operations a decade ago, produce straw panels made almost entirely from renewable materials: the frames are hand-built from timber and filled with untreated straw, a by-product of the agricultural industry. They are then closed in with a breathable lime render and delivered to the building site. ‘Straw was always a local building material; all we are doing is reinventing our building traditions,’ explains Finlay White, business development director at ModCell Straw Technology. ‘Plus straw buildings feel more comfortable, you breathe better in them and the acoustics are lovely.’

The Sieffs loved that straw absorbs CO₂ as it grows and that the panels are almost entirely biodegradable. As a result, the eco lodges will have one of the lowest carbon footprints available, which chimes with the company’s ethos. Working together with Devon-based architects Woodward Smith who introduced the Sieffs to the idea of straw panels, the owners were delighted that the new build took a few months, with close to 40 pre-prepared panels slotted into place in three days. ‘The foundations went in last October and the first room was usable just three months later,’ says Simon. ‘We’re a functioning business – we needed something that could be

done relatively quickly so we could carry on working during construction.’ The panels were prefabricated in an Exeter factory but if a project is too far away it’s possible to cut down on the carbon footprint by producing them in a so-called ‘Flying Factory’. The company works with local farmers to identify a source of straw, along with a suitable location to assemble the panels, normally within three to 15 miles of the construction site. ‘The wonderful thing is that this model of construction can be used anywhere in the UK. What’s more, we’re not weather-dependent as we mostly work in a factory setting so delivery times tend to be shorter than traditional builds,’ Finlay explains.

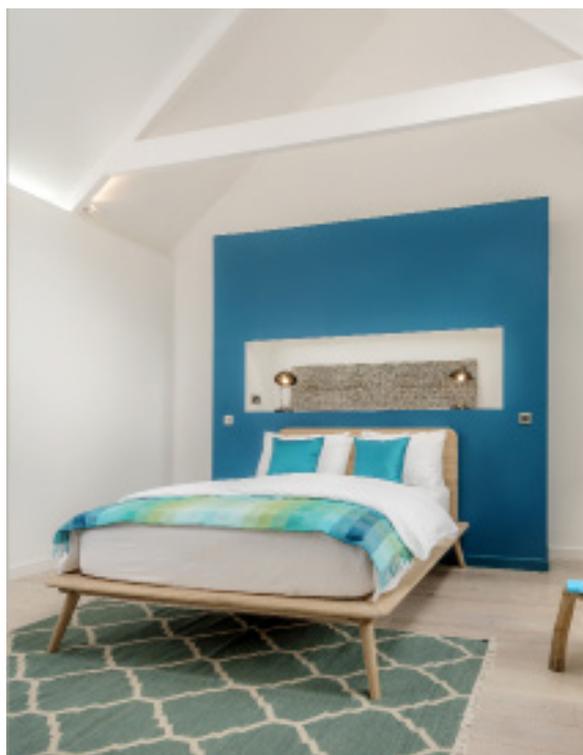
The use of natural materials means the walls have excellent heat retention in winter and the rooms remain cooler in summer. ‘The suites feel very warm, they really hold the heat. We actually added windows later in the build and it was very easy to do this as you just pull the straw out in the right place,’ says Simon.

The couple have built the lodges to blend in seamlessly with the existing 300-year-old buildings in Yeotown. ‘We decided to clad the two new buildings in quarried Cornish stone ➡

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Yeotown is a place to meditate and unwind. And from wood to whitewash, you'd never guess that these luxury lodges are made from humble straw.



and douglas fir to tie them in with their surroundings,’ says Simon. With 15 years experience running an interior design, art and antique furniture business, he has designed the suites to be a natural and cosy extension of the rest of Yeotown. Each suite has a different theme – the Gratitude Lodge, for example, is reminiscent of a luxurious Alpine ski lodge, while another has rustic French furniture, whitewashed walls and transports guests to Provence. Walls are clad with old kentucky oak – from a disused railway the couple found in a reclamation yard – or pine. And one-of-a-kind bedside tables made from old Indonesian timber, retro lamps and bright modern artworks decorate the bedrooms.

Yeotown is just one of a clutch of new developments for ModCell; its panels are increasingly being used in housing, schools and cafés across the west of England. ‘Often the perception is that a straw-panelled house might not be very durable, so I spend time talking to developers and architects about the tests we’ve carried out with the University of Bath,’ explains Finlay. ‘If the straw isn’t exposed to moisture – and ours never is – it will last more than a lifetime, plus it doesn’t burn easily so it’s not a fire hazard.’

Simon says that he’s particularly pleased with the solid feel of the ModCell panels and that guests are enjoying the novelty of staying somewhere that’s usually their very first straw house. ‘People come to us because of the ethos of our company, in search of a cleaner, greener lifestyle – and the straw houses add to their overall experience.’ And it goes without saying that these beautiful straw houses are sturdy enough to keep the wolf from the door. 

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