



An Irish family living in Hong Kong has found the perfect holiday home for family gatherings – in the Italian Alps, writes **Orna Mulcahy**. Photographs: **Massimo Listri**



# Snow place like home

**M**ost investors would see an ancient tottering house stranded in the snow as something to avoid at all costs. But for Lucie McCullough a 17th-century farmhouse, in a hamlet in the Italian Alps, seemed like a perfectly logical buy – even if she lives in Hong Kong.

The interior designer and her husband, Ronan, a banker from Dublin, wanted a base in Europe to escape the hot, humid Asian summers and to provide a Christmas base for the couple's scattered siblings.

They had long been on the lookout for a holiday home big enough for family gatherings and had viewed properties all over Ire-

land, as well as in England and Scotland.

Then a holiday in Pregelato, a ski resort about 60km from Turin that saw a burst of development prior to the 2006 winter Olympics, got them thinking about buying and renovating an old house in the region. Not so easy as it turned out: the area they sought had no more than a dozen unrenovated houses, and none was for sale.

It took a local architect two years to find them a property, and even then it had certain limitations, with one end of the house jammed up against the mountain side and the other attached to another property. Inside, it was difficult to see what they were buying, as the entire ground floor, a former

stables, had sand up to the ceiling. Still, the plan had always been to carry out a major refurbishment, and McCullough, who had carried out several renovations for clients in Hong Kong, was eager to start work on a personal project.

With the help of their architect, they called on artisans throughout the area, including his uncle, a sculptor and maker of hurdy-gurdys, who was on hand to satisfy even the most outlandish requests. McCullough – a one-time shoe designer who had cut her teeth in the fashion world working for *Vogue* in London and for a while with Ralph Lauren – wasn't above the odd whimsical moment.

"If I said I wanted a tree stump for a table base, Guido would go out into the forest and get me exactly what I wanted. He was brilliant to work with. He made the 500kg hot tub that we have on the roof – we were going to import one from Alaska but then he just made us one. And he is a genius with doors: all the doors in the house are big beautiful studded ones, and they can be locked in a way that only we know – no keys. It's great fun when guests come to stay."

Guido also designed a vast square dining table that folds in ingeniously to accommodate smaller groups, although as it happens the house is generally full to capacity.

It has six double bedrooms with ensuite





Mimi – now four years old – prepared for a frantic final few weeks to get the house ready for Christmas. “My sister came over from Dublin to help me. There was no way we could delay things as we had two sets of family coming for the holidays. Every single person in the village seemed to be working on the house, There were 46 people there in the final week.”

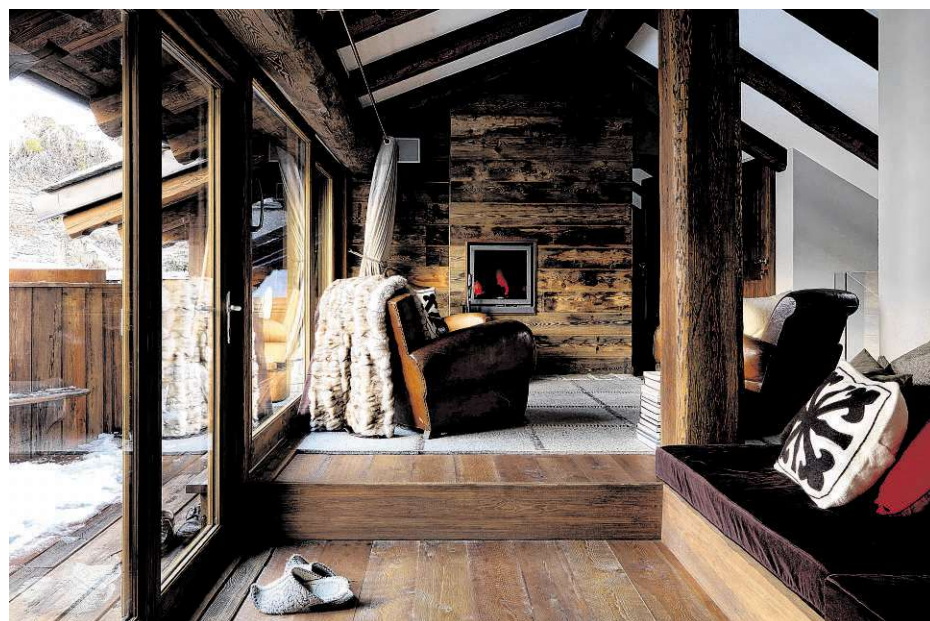
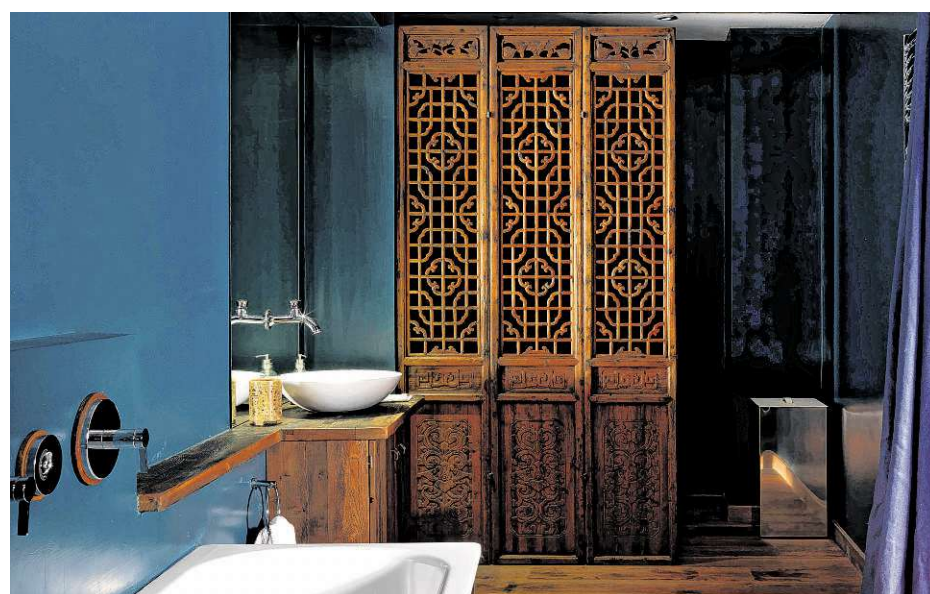
With her travel restricted, McCullough had to source all the furniture for the house in Hong Kong. “It was a good bit more expensive that way, and then the shipment got stuck in customs until December 22nd. There was a huge snowfall and the delivery was quite something – beds were being winged up through windows in a blizzard.” It all worked out in the end, and the extended family has since had regular holidays there, both winter and summer.

With 50km of slopes running between altitudes of 1,535m-2,700m, the resort caters to all skiing abilities, with good cross-country skiing and snow boarding also on offer. Club Med now operates a major ski resort nearby – one that, coincidentally, was originally developed by an Irish consortium – and the area has a large selection of restaurants and cafes in the surrounding villages.

The McCulloughs now have a second child, 18-month-old Otis, and a move from Hong Kong may be on the cards. Baita will continue to be their European base for now, but one day they would love to renovate a big old house in Ireland.

“We see amazing houses on the internet and think, wouldn’t it be nice. . .”

For details of the McCullough's Italian home and rental availability see [baita1697.com](mailto:baita1697.com)



bathrooms and an attic dormitory for children. The interior, which has featured in *Architectural Digest*, is decorated in a mix of styles with Asian and European artefacts throughout. “I love Italian, French, English and Irish style and mixing it all up. It’s a little bit eccentric but not totally out there,” says McCullough.

When it came to planning out the bedrooms several carpenters pitched for the job. McCullough chose a different one for each room so that each would have its own personality.

Having finally purchased the house, the McCulloughs gave themselves a year to complete the renovation, but in February of that year, they got word they had been approved to adopt a child. Three weeks later they were matched with their daughter, Mimi, then four months old. One proviso was that they were not allowed to leave Hong Kong for six months following the adoption, which meant work on the house had to be directed from a distance.

The day the travel embargo was lifted, McCullough was on a plane with baby