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Sunday

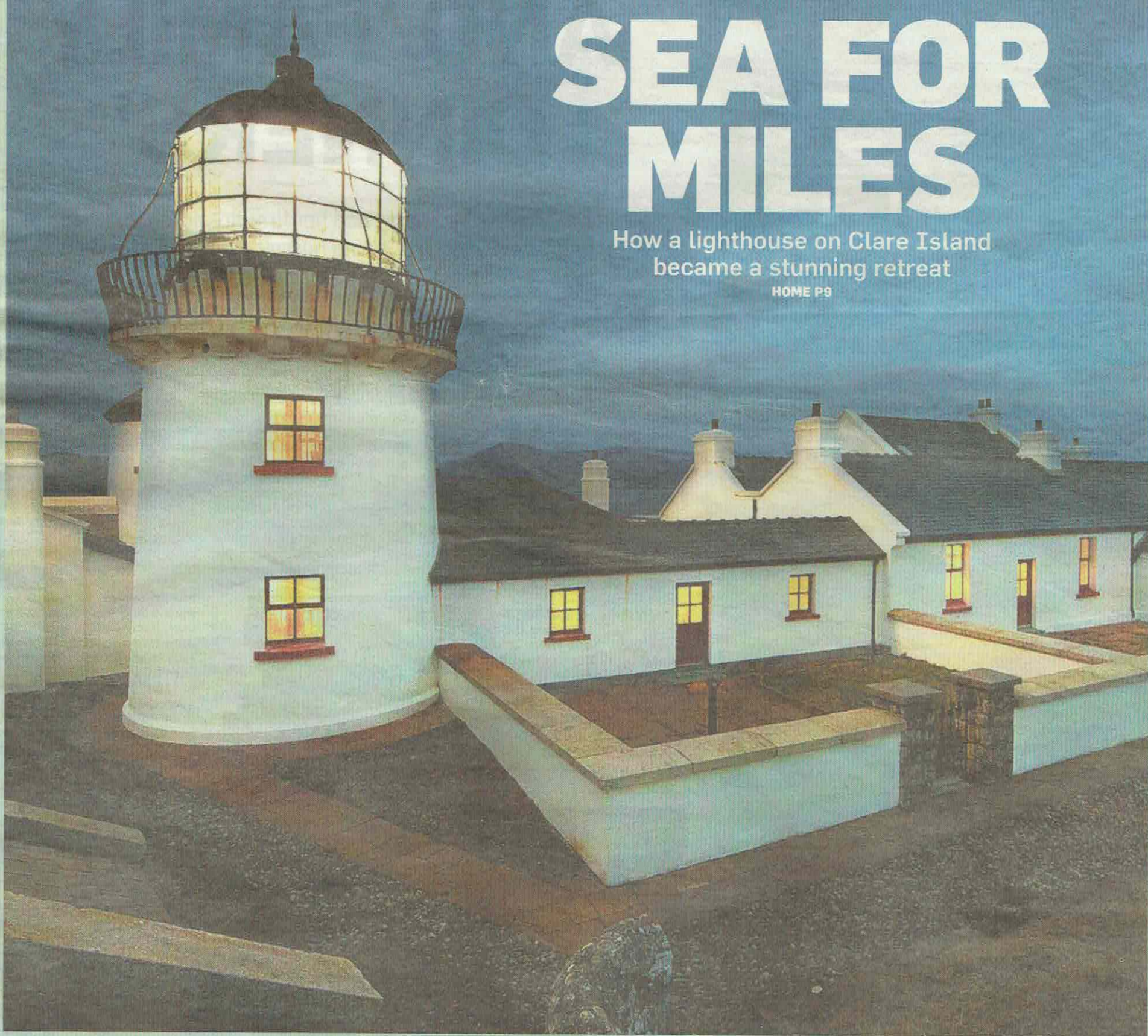
LIFE HOME FOOD INGEAR

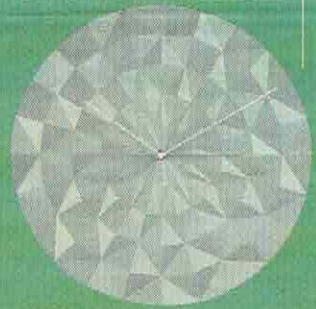
TRAVEL
INSIDE

SEA FOR MILES

How a lighthouse on Clare Island became a stunning retreat

HOME P9





MICHAEL McLAUGHLIN

McCabe and Keating took over the running of the exclusive guesthouse in Clew Bay, Co Mayo, in May



RETREAT INTO THE LIGHT

A striking location, panoramic views and chic minimalist interiors are all on offer to guests at Clare Island's refurbished lighthouse, writes Aine Ryan

When Cora Keating saw an advertisement seeking someone to run an exclusive lighthouse retreat on Clare Island, off the Co Mayo coast, last year, she didn't have to think twice. She did, however, have to charm her boyfriend, Rory McCabe, who was a bit less inclined to jump in at the deep end. Whatever she said, it worked. Nine

months later, the sun is shining and the coffee smells good in the beacon tower where the couple take a quick break before Keating heads for the kitchen to check if her seaweed breads are rising. Then Rory leaves in the lighthouse SUV to pick up guests from the midday ferry. The visitors will pay from €165 to €225 per person a night to stay, including breakfast and a six-course dinner. Since May, when the couple moved

from Kinsale in Co Cork to the remote compound on Clew Bay's largest island, it has been a steep learning curve. There have been cookery courses and wine tastings to attend, meetings with local food producers and trips to the mainland to stock up on supplies — a 15-minute boat trip to Roonagh Quay, near Louisburgh. The work is hard, but there are benefits: the spectacular sunrises and

sunsets, for instance. "Each night, after we finish work, we retire to the tower for a cup of tea, or something stronger, and look out on this amazing scene," says Keating. "Before work in the morning we can have our zen moments here — watching dolphins jumping or an islander lifting lobster pots into his curragh way below." Their new home and place of work sits atop the 400ft-high cliffs in the village of

Ballytoughy Mor. To the west stands Budawanny, or Bud an Mhanach (the monk's penis), and to the north, beyond Achill Head, De Bille's rocks, named after Captain Mathias De Bille whose frigate, the Bornholm, was almost lost in treacherous seas there in 1782. The romance of the place is undeniable. The first paying guests this summer were a young couple who became

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engaged in the tower. There was a magnificent sunset and Keating had illuminated the spiral stairway and landing with candles. There was a bottle of champagne on ice and the Atlantic ocean as a backdrop.

The lighthouse was built in 1803 and decommissioned in 1965. It is owned by Goesta Fischer, a German pathologist, who paid €1.05m for it in 2008. When he bought it, it had already been refurbished by previous owners, who had run it as a guesthouse.

Fischer owns several properties in Co Mayo, including a "haunted house" near the village of Newport, that he bought in 1985. The doctor runs a medical institute in the east German town of Wilhelmshaver that specialises in cancer research. Renovating houses is his hobby. "My wife and I have been coming to Ireland since the mid-1970s and eventually bought the 'haunted house'," he says.

"I always wanted a place near Westport because of its heritage and proximity to Clew Bay. When I saw the ad for Clare Island lighthouse, I was in Mayo, but just had two days left of my holidays. It was winter time and there was no boat to the island that day, so I hired one and went up to the lighthouse. I simply fell in love with the buildings and its unique location."

It wasn't until Fischer met Castlebar-based Roie McCann, an interior designer, that the concept of running the lighthouse as an exclusive retreat began to take shape. "We started talking about all the possibilities and eventually decided to open it as some sort of guesthouse," McCann says.

Her eclectic flair is in evidence throughout the property, which still retains some of its flagstone floors, but also has underfloor heating, open fires and soft furnishings that soften the intended spartan ambience.

Gilt-framed paintings and a German piano add character to the reception rooms and sleeping quarters, as does furniture bought in car-boot sales and Foxford wool rugs and cushions.

Revamping a lighthouse was uncharted territory for McCann, but Fischer had already overseen a substantial restoration project. Work started shortly after he bought the lighthouse and it was completed earlier this year.

"It's very easy to do the interior design when the fabric of a house is good," says McCann. "Goesta's passion is bringing old buildings back to their former glory, and once he saw the lighthouse he couldn't countenance the thought of it falling into the sea."

By the time McCann became involved, the underfloor heating had been installed under the dark-oak

Above: the reception area; below, the viewing platform and, inset, McCann, who took on the interior design, and Fischer, who bought the place in 2008



engineered floors. The ancillary buildings were transformed into the guest accommodation, called Tower House, Cliff Corner, Banshee Cottage and the Sauna Suite. In the main building the designer had to furnish a drawing room, library-cum-dining room, guest rooms and the large kitchen.

"As these quarters were built in 1806, I didn't want to make the rooms stuffy or flowery. I wanted to conjure bygone

days with some understated soft furnishings.

"So the drawing room curtains are sage-green linen, which evokes a natural feeling and a connection to the landscape outside."

Most of the furniture in the reception rooms

was bought at antiques auctions and restored, while McCann designed a book shelf, which was built by an island carpenter and is filled with an eccentric collection of books. All the rooms have open fires or multi-fuel stoves.

Achill View, one of the bedrooms in the main building, offers a panoramic vista, and in the bedroom of Tower House, which is at the top of a spiral staircase, there are 360-degree views from the cast-iron bed.

The latter room is across a courtyard from the main house and is set in the original tower. All the furniture was purpose built and the bed was designed with a curve to fit against the wall.

McCabe is a native of Clare Island, having grown up there with his six siblings in Linnane's, a busy bar, shop and post office at the quay. Keating is from Tipperary and studied environmental science at the University of Ulster, before travelling extensively. "I funded my travels by coming home every now and then and working in restaurants, sometimes taking two jobs," she says.

During that busy decade, Keating also found her sea-legs when she sailed from Kinsale, in Co Cork, where her parents lived for a

MICHAEL McLAUGHLIN



The lighthouse sits on 400ft-high cliffs and was commissioned in 1905



time, to the Canaries and spent a winter there before returning to Kinsale to open SuBar, selling juices and smoothies. Meanwhile, McCabe was doing a master's in ethnomusicology at University College Cork, where he met Keating.

Back at the lighthouse there are no televisions, but wi-fi is available for guests who need to reconnect with the outside world. Those requiring

human interaction can call into the kitchen, where some guests have breakfast. The trawler-red storage presses there provide a warm welcome.

Word is that the conversation is always good at the huge table, which was made on the island using 200-year-old church floorboards.

clareislandlighthouse.com

Right, from the top; the Tower House suite; the cheerful kitchen where guests eat breakfast; and the Achill View Room

If you can tell us what is on pages 104 & 105 of our

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