

Bye bye basics: Inside Scotland's 21st-century youth hostels

Radical new reinvention of premises is a world away from accepted notions of 'slumming it'

By Richard Baynes

IN the past they have been found upgrading football executive suites, high-powered offices and luxury hotels.

But now designers from the upmarket Scots firm Graven have been brought in to carry out a £450,000 upgrade to – a youth hostel.

In a radical move away from the hostel image of worn lino and draughty dorms, the downstairs area of the organisation's 270-bed Edinburgh hostel is being transformed.

It is going from what Graven boss Ross Hunter says "might have been a community centre from the 1990s" into a cleverly integrated space with sales, dining and chill-out areas flowing effortlessly into each other.

Lighting, soft furnishings and decor have all been thought through so the hostel can compete with some of the most modern spaces in the capital.

To keep the budget down the designers have kept much of the original layout and even some of the furniture but applied some expensive modern finishes to give it the urban chic they are renowned for.

Hostelling Scotland (HS) – as the

Scottish Youth Hostels Association has now been rebranded – says it is part of a major new drive to modernise, upgrade and allow its hostels to compete and win in a crowded accommodation market. HS is one of the biggest players in the Scottish tourism market, with 34 hostels across Scotland.

It accommodates 380,000 people a year and has a turnover of £9 million, bringing £25m a year the Scottish visitor economy.

HS chief executive Margo Paterson admits it was the "funky" approach of the designers that led her organisation to Graven, and Hunter says it was his personal memory of, and enthusiasm for, hostelling that convinced him to take on the challenge of upgrading a youth hostel.

He now has designs on helping to modernise the rest of the HS estate, talking enthusiastically about designing a special Scottish bunk bed that could be used throughout the HS estate.

Both emphasised that the unique nature of hostelling, where travellers get the chance to mix and meet, was

key to their thinking.

"Because Edinburgh Central is our flagship hostel and competition is fierce in the capital we wanted to get it right, so we looked to Graven," said Paterson.

"They're an award-winning Scottish design company – what attracted us to them is that they have a great deal of experience in the hospitality world, we are a national hostelling organisation so both ourselves and Graven were really keen to come up with an exciting new design that would really best represent our ongoing modernisation.

"They're just funky and they have such great ideas."

Fascinating archive pictures from Hostelling Scotland and artists' impressions of the new Edinburgh hostel show how hostelling and hostellers in Scotland have changed over the years.

In the 1950s, many hostels were simple wood-clad buildings, such as the well-known Glencoe premises.

Riders would use hostels as touring stops, while school groups such as Kilmarnock Academy would use them as a holiday base.

Warming your knees at the enormous stove was classic entertainment in the 1950s at Crianlarich, and washing facilities at those such as Rowardennan were primitive.

Other hostels were in converted big houses, with domestic touches such as fireplaces in the rooms at Oban still evident. But an innovative approach to design has reared its head in the past with the Torridon Hostel built in the 1970s, which still has a touch of mid-century style.

The refurbished Glen Nevis hostel has plenty of style, and the new Edinburgh one's public areas in the artists' impressions show the new look of hostels and hostelling.

The Edinburgh transformation follows last year's £2.2m upgrade of HS's flagship Glen Nevis hostel, used by thousands each year as a base to climb Ben Nevis and explore the surrounding area.

The old wooden building was given a major facelift and an all-new interior, including en-suite bathrooms, twin rooms, giant windows to take advantage of stunning views, and a glossy modern feel. Other hostels are beginning to feel the wind of change, with the barracks-like Inverness hostel getting a smart new lounge and cafe bar area with features such as a water refill station.

Hostels modernised recently include Aberdeen, where more private rooms have been installed. There have also been upgrades at Loch Ossian, Achmelvich Beach, Oban and Lochranza on Arran.

Ross Hunter, who founded Graven in the 1980s with his partner Janice Kirkpatrick, is delighted to be helping Hostelling Scotland move into a new era.

His organisation is better known for designing upmarket interiors at the likes of the Blythswood Square hotel in Glasgow, the VIP lounges at Anfield stadium, and brand and image

development at Royal Bank of Scotland premises.

Hunter spent many youthful holidays in hostels, starting in 1976

when he paid 45p a night at the Glen Doll hostel in Angus before walking over Jock's Road to Inverey on Deeside and paying just 15p to stay there.

He said the Edinburgh hostel, a 1990s city-centre office building converted to a hostel in 2006, had become "out of touch" with visitors' expectations: "It had become a bit institutional looking – it might have been a community centre from the 1990s."

The challenge was to upgrade it to compete with budget hotels and other cut-price offers for visitors who wanted a more sophisticated city experience, without ruining the communal feel which sets it apart from hotels and Airbnb.

He said a cleverly-designed feature dubbed the "Great Wall of China" running along the space managed to unite its different uses, while high-end tiles and stone provided the gloss it needed. "I've got fond memories of Scottish hostelling," he said. "A key reason why people stay in hostels is the social experience.

"You meet people who are like-minded – whether they're the same age or not is irrelevant as they're there because they want the same kind of experience. That opportunity to speak to fellow hostellers is still there and the thing that's special about hostelling in Scotland is that it provides a really safe environment to have that kind of engagement."

The project has fired his imagination. "We would love the opportunity of extending that kind of thinking into other locations into other hostels too ... we could even design a new Scottish hostel bunk they could use across their estate," he said.

HS has been steadily modernising – chores for guests were scrapped in the 1990s, alcohol started being sold in 2006, and "wardens" are now managers – but the arrival of Paterson as boss of the organisation accelerated the change, including the new name.

Paterson has said HS needs to be in cities, where it has to compete with hotel chains, because that provides surpluses that help pay for upkeep and development of more remote hostels,

which the organisation remains deeply committed to.

It is also holding true to the “youth” element of the original name, with moves such as the appointment of the first youth trustee, Sophie Bell, 22. More young trustees are being sought, and a £50,000 Explorer Fund has been set up to fund trips for youth groups.

Paterson added: “We’ll never be Premier Inn but that’s what our members and guests love about us. The one thing that’s consistent is our welcome and our good customer service but when you go into each hostel there’s always something a bit different.”



Hostelling Scotland (HS) accommodates 380,000 people a year and has a turnover of £9 million, bringing £25m a year to the Scottish visitor economy



Hostels modernised recently include Aberdeen, which is unrecognisable from its previous incarnation, above





Edinburgh's youth hostel has been upgraded by Scots firm Graven to cleverly integrate space with dining and chill-out areas which flow effortlessly into each other