

WEAVING A DREAM

After visiting the Isle of Skye 20 years ago, textile designer and weaver Maggie Williams followed her heart to a windswept croft that is now her much-loved home, winter weaving studio and café-gallery

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Whatever the season and no matter how busy life is, Maggie Williams loves to walk along the Trotternish peninsula. There is always inspiration for her weaving to be gathered from the ever-changing dance of light on land and sea. This is also a place to relax with her partner, John, after a busy day at home in Ellishadder where she runs the art café during the summer and weaves almost obsessively through the winter months. Even after living here for six years, Maggie still finds it a joy waking every morning to see the stark peninsula, then walking her rescue dogs, Meg and Nell, on Staffin Beach.

Ellishadder is a small township on the northeast coast of Skye and Maggie's croft is a short walk to the north shore and freshwater Loch

Mealt, which tumbles down the striking Kilt Rock into the Sound of Raasay. It's a timeless place, remote and wild, with huge waterfalls and dramatic coastal rock formations. For Maggie, the island feels immersed in nature. 'I first came to Skye as a teenager and I knew, with some certainty, that this was where I would live one day,' she says. 'What struck me was the stark beauty of the sea and the spectacular geology. The sea between here and the mainland always seems a vivid range of colours and although land with the mountains beyond isn't too far away, the water between seems deep and vast.'

ISLAND ESCAPE

Skye's dramatic scenery is clearly woven into Maggie's textile designs, but her love for weaving





ABOVE, FROM TOP DOWN **Cake and woollen comfort in front of the fire at Maggie's croft; Maggie's hand woven 'Floddigarry' and 'Staffin' cushions**

began before visiting the isle. She was 13 when she attended an evening class on weaving, and she immediately loved it. Her dad made her a simple loom and she bought her first table loom from Saturday job savings. Now 43 years young, she looks back and says, 'I must have been a strange teenager, with my loom and spinning wheel!'

After gaining an HND in design crafts and a BA in design technology, Maggie, who hails from Derbyshire, taught textiles and food technology in Cumbria, but lack of time for weaving and the call of Scotland's west coast eventually took her northwards. Twenty years after first visiting Skye, Maggie realised her dream of buying a plot of land in Ellishadder and building a traditional croft house there. She says: 'I combined my two main interests, food and weaving, by setting up a café gallery. While the build was happening, I was crazily weaving to make enough work to sell as time would be short once the café opened. I also started a vegetable garden on the croft and introduced hens and ducks.' She keeps three hardy Herdwick sheep for their silvery grey and nut-brown fleeces, whose coarse wool she uses in rugs.

Ellishadder café-gallery opened in the front room of Maggie's home with extra tables in the garden on warmer

days. Maggie makes tasty, wholesome vegetarian food and 'wicked cakes', following in the baking tradition handed down by her mother and grandmother. Everything is made from scratch using fresh and, when possible, organic and local ingredients, including produce from the garden. 'I've met so many lovely people in the café and it's very satisfying to know that people love the food: there's rarely anything left on the plates for the hens!' she says.

SEASONAL WEAVING

Although Maggie loves socialising with the visitors who travel from near and far, she also looks forward to the winter when she dedicates herself to weaving. 'After a brief holiday, usually in the Outer Isles, I give myself a few weeks of design time when I sample new patterns and colours from the ideas I've gathered over summer.'

During this season, Maggie virtually lives in her well-lit, upstairs loom room. Once the weaving of pure, soft hanks of lambswool or merino wool begins, she works long solitary days. 'I need to be alone, no noise or interruptions. I don't even listen to music or the radio – I have to create a calm, clutter-free space to focus on the methodical, repetitive motion of the loom, which becomes almost meditative.' Maggie



FROM FAR LEFT Maggie's croft at Ellishadder in the northeast of the Isle of Skye is her home, weaving studio and café/gallery; Maggie busy weaving at her loom; lengths of hand woven fabric ready to be sewn into cushions, along with one of Maggie's paintings Staffin Beach

says that weaving requires careful attention and patience. The process, even before the weaving commences, is time-consuming. If you thread a heddle on the wrong shaft it will show up as a mistake in the finished cloth so it's important to stay focused.

'Instinct takes over as I design on the loom, incorporating colours and textures I've seen to form patterns,' she explains. 'I still get a huge buzz watching the woollen cloth emerge as the horizontal and vertical threads intertwine to form this strong, beautiful fabric. I may spend up to a week on a length of cloth, which is then cut from the loom. As the wool still contains oils, the fabric needs to be washed, dried and pressed, ready to be used. I generally build up a pile of woven fabrics and later in the winter begin making these into bags, throws, cushions and home accessories.'

SEASCAPE COLOURS

Weaving to make a living is very different to hobby weaving. Maggie says that there's more pressure to make things that people will want to buy so that you can survive another year financially. 'Although I'm doing something I love, in a place I adore,

there's still a mortgage to pay along with all the other expenses of modern life,' she adds.

Despite the pressure, Maggie's talent and dedication has resulted in a range of beautiful natural textiles that are eagerly anticipated and always well received, with the influence of Skye woven into the cloth in such a tangible way. 'I always have a camera ready to capture the amazing moments on my walks: the light on the water, seaweed in small pools, the shapes of stones and pebbles, all of which seep into my designs,' says Maggie. 'Some pieces have very specific inspirations. One recent pattern came about after a walk on the beach at Ord, on the south of the island, which was strewn with lovely pink and grey pebbles.'

Maggie sees it as a huge privilege to be earning while living in such a stunning location, even though the hours are long. But year on year, the demand for her textiles, predominantly featuring the blues, turquoises and greys of the Skye seascape, continues to grow. 'I love that my cushions and throws find their way to far-flung corners of the world,' she says. 'It's a little piece of Ellishadder in people's homes.'

NEED to KNOW

 Ellishadder Art Café is open Mon to Fri, 12pm-4.30pm, from Easter to October (ellishadderartcafe.co.uk). Buy Maggie's textiles directly from the café when you visit, or online at maggiewilliams.co.uk.

 WHERE TO STAY There's a range of places, such as boutique B&B Mint Croft in Waternish (mintcroftskye.com); self-catering Blue Moon Studio, in Waternish (bluemoonskye.co.uk); and the family-run Uig Hotel in Trotternish (uighotel.com).

 HOW TO GET THERE By car: Via the Skye Bridge at Kyle of Lochalsh; from Glasgow via Fort William, it is approximately 200 miles. By ferry: From Mallaig to the Isle of Skye takes about 20 minutes. By train: From Glasgow to Mallaig. Please note that the ferry arrives at the south of the island, 50 miles from Ellishadder.