

A shore thing

Hailed as the hippest hangout on Dorset's Jurassic Coast, The Seaside Boarding House is the cliff-top creation of former Groucho Club co-founder Mary-Lou Sturridge.

So is it infused with maritime magic? We take you on an exclusive tour

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Mary-Lou Sturridge in the dining room of the Seaside Boarding House



The painting of Mary-Lou's grandfather in the library

Two days to go before the Seaside Boarding House is due to open, and Mary-Lou Sturridge is doing half a dozen things at once. One call on her mobile and another on the landline; a picture to be hung, a delivery driver to deal with and now *Dorset Magazine* has arrived for exclusive behind-the-scenes access.

This is the most eagerly anticipated opening in West Dorset for years, yet there is no sense of panic. You get the impression that Mary-Lou - serene and elegant - doesn't do panic. And this transmits itself to her staff, who bustle around with energy and excitement: they seem proud to be part of this right from the start.

Not, perhaps, that Mary-Lou would think of the opening of the Seaside Boarding House, Restaurant and Bar as a start. It has been seven years since she first saw the building advertised for sale in *Country Life*.

One of two matching villas built in 1895 on the cliff-top above Burton Bradstock (the other is owned by musician Billy Bragg). Over the last 100 years it had been variously a retirement home, a wartime barracks for Polish airmen and a B&B with salmon pink interiors.

Mary-Lou immediately saw its potential. "I'd scoured the entire South Coast from Sussex to Cornwall for the perfect location, and this was it. We do seaside hotels rather badly in this country - very few are affordable, with great service and levels of comfort and I wanted to change that."

Her vision for the building was that of an Edward Hopper painting, clean lines teamed with unaffected homeliness: from clapped-out to clapperboard.

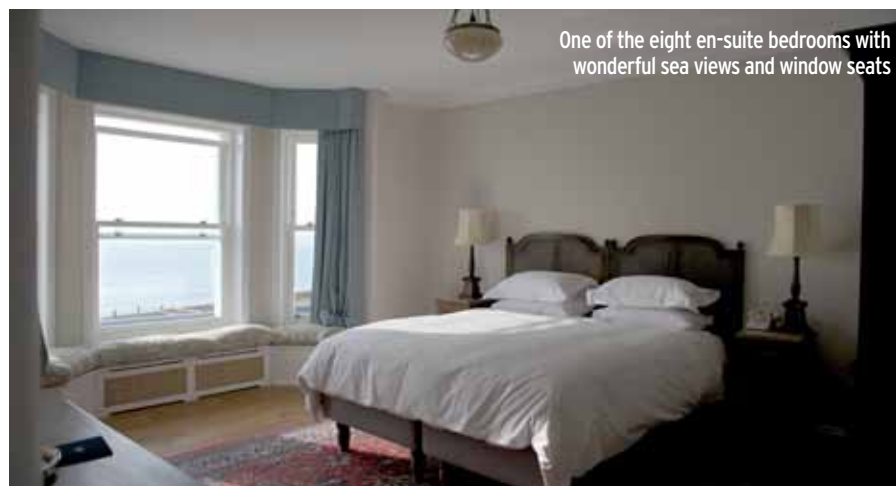
There was, however, to be little plain sailing for this particular seaside project. The applications almost stalled at the planning stage before West Dorset MP Oliver Letwin

intervened, emphasising the importance of tourism to Dorset's heritage coast. During the renovation, the roofers arrived on the day St Jude's storm hit northern Europe late in October 2013 and the rain poured down and gales howled more or less solidly from then until the following Valentine's Day. Even a caravan pressed into service as a makeshift office was struck by lightning. At times it must have seemed less like a renovation project more like a Hollywood disaster movie.

Yet here we are now, on a bright but bitterly cold winter's day, and all those travails look to have been worth it. The restaurant and bar run across the entire frontage of the property, and huge windows offer stunning views across the spectacular sweep of Chesil Beach and Lyme Bay to the horizon. Today the sunlight shatters on gently rippling water in a million golden pieces, but on another day a raging storm will whip the water into frothing grey and white - either way, those inside will have front-row seats.

Mary-Lou's vision for the restaurant was that of a first class dining-room on an ocean-going liner: the walls are a deep velvety blue with crisp white woodwork and pale gold accents, all bathed in the amazing maritime light. Renowned architect firm The Chassay Studio took charge of the building design, and Dorset-based CG Fry was the contractor, but with no previous experience of interior design, Mary-Lou took charge of creating the interior schemes herself, right down to the smallest detail.

She travelled the length and breadth of the country, going to maritime auctions, hotel sales and antique shops. Everywhere



One of the eight en-suite bedrooms with wonderful sea views and window seats

you look there are imaginative and humorous touches - the banisters are railings salvaged from a ship, the tablecloths are copies of ones she saw in a Greek taverna, the ice-cream coups, silver water jugs and tea pots were bought as a job lot from a Devon antiques shop. The furniture in the library came from her mother's house, and the portrait hanging over the fireplace of a handsome young army officer is of her grandfather. The bar stools were a present from her old colleagues at London's famous Groucho Club, where she used to be managing director. "When we dismantled the stools to oil them vast piles of Twiglets - all long past their sell-by date - fell out," she laughs.

Everything is pared back, and emphatically not grand. "I want guests to feel like they're in someone's home, but without the clutter," she says. "It's important that people feel they can come here in jeans or in a taffeta ball gown and neither will feel out of place." There's even a ground floor shower room to wash the sand off when you come back from the beach, before settling in for a cocktail.

What Mary-Lou's too modest to admit is that it takes a lot of effort to make it look this effortless. It also takes a lot of time, love and a forensic attention to detail. "I couldn't have done it without the help of my friend Martin Ball from Country Seats in Bridport," she confesses, "he gave me lots of ideas and advice."

There are eight bedrooms, all with sea view, at £200 per night. Each one has beds piled high with pillows, window seats, books and radio, plus the mod-cons like room service and Wi-Fi expected by a demanding clientele. But Mary-Lou is adamant that this is not so much a hotel as a 'restaurant with rooms.' Even the name has been carefully chosen to reflect this: the warm universality of 'seaside' together with the unpretentious inclusivity of 'boarding house'.

So, despite her Groucho past, there is absolutely no membership policy here. The restaurant and bar are open all day, every day to everyone, for morning coffee, lunch or dinner.

The kitchen is the heartbeat of the place. The menu, which will change with every service, has been devised by the well-respected Alistair Little who is the Executive Chef, and Luciano da Silva (formerly at the Blue Fish on Portland) is Head Chef. "Good chef, good vibe, good service," says Mary-Lou. "We're not a 'fish' restaurant because we've already got those nearby with Hix at Lyme Regis and The Hive. We're quite simple and classic: somewhere for locals to come for a celebration dinner, but also able to provide guests with a hamper of crab sandwiches for a picnic."

The Seaside Boarding House uses as >



How to make a Mary-Lou Martini

Take a frozen glass, swirl vermouth around it, tip the vermouth out, Pour in frozen vodka (Polish or Russian only), serve with a twist.

"It's important that people feel they can come here in jeans or in a taffeta ball gown and neither will feel out of place"

One of the elegant en-suite bathrooms



Maritime items were sourced from auction rooms and antique shops



The dining room features deep blue walls with accents of gold



“I’d scoured the entire South Coast from Sussex to Cornwall for the perfect location, and this was it”

many local suppliers as possible, both for their food (one of the waiters’ sons is a fisherman and sails past every day, so that’s their daily catch right there) and their drink: Black Cow vodka, Temperley cider brandy and Furleigh Estate pink champagne all feature on the bar list. Cocktails are the responsibility of her right-hand man and mixologist supreme Jonny Jeffrey, formerly of Hix and the pop-up Great Barn in Branscombe, though they both confess to a good-natured difference of opinion on how to make the perfect martini. “If you want a martini done properly, then ask the barman for a ‘Mary-Lou Martini,’” she chuckles.

They may have hit the ground running but when we went back a few days after the opening the espresso martini was first-class, and my bourride was crammed with the freshest of fish in a rich broth. My husband waxed lyrical about his beef peposo and was very possessive of his apple tarte with caramel ice cream. Service was friendly and unstuffy, as indeed is the entire place.

It’s hard to escape the feeling that this is West Dorset’s time. Two seasons of *Broadchurch* has let the rest of the country into our local secret - that this is one of the most beautiful parts of Great Britain. *Far From The Madding Crowd*, starring Carey Mulligan and adapted by *One Day* author David Nicholls, is released in May (Mary-Lou’s nephew Tom Sturridge plays Sergeant Troy). Brassica has taken over Wild Garlic’s spot in nearby Beaminster and is getting deservedly rave reviews.

And now comes The Seaside Boarding House. Will it do for the Bridport area what Babington House has done for Frome? I would say it’s a sure thing. ■



Sample Menu

- Cavolo nero, pumpkin and white bean minestrone with pesto £6.50
- Three Winter Salads: winterslaw with walnuts, fennel with blood oranges

- and bruschetta of butter beans & rocket £7.95
- Bourride - Provencal-style fish stew with cod, squid, prawns, mussels, potatoes, fennel, rouille, croutons & Gruyere £16.50

- Peposo - Tuscan-style braised beef with pancetta, red wine, peppercorns & mash £15.90
- Caramelised blood oranges with rice pudding £7.50
- Rhubarb trifle £7.25



The Seaside Boarding House Restaurant and Bar

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