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# Mixing cocktails & CULTURES

There will be a fabulous backdrop to a lively multi-cultural Christmas at newly-redecorated Easby Hall near Richmond, both inside and out

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**E**asby Hall is a tranquil place, overlooking a ruined abbey and with views to Richmond Castle in the distance. That's what first attracted John and Karen Clarke to this handsome Georgian property. Having lived and worked in London and Hong Kong, Karen had been seeking a rural, pollution-free home in which to bring up her children, and Easby Hall was perfect. "I relish the sense of inner calm it affords, especially in the early morning as I walk along the ha-ha with a cup of tea in hand, gazing at the abbey," she says. But the hall has another, much livelier, aspect. It is a fabulous venue for special occasions and get-togethers, welcoming paying guests from all over the globe. The Christmas week is reserved for family though, when all sense of calm dissipates and the Clarkes enjoy a rumbustious, multi-cultural, multi-lingual extravaganza. "Christmas, Natale, Navidad... where to begin?" laughs Karen. "With 13 guests and eight dogs and

a merry linguistic jumble thrown into our mulled wine mix, one thing's for sure - it won't be dull!" Daughter Charlotte's partner Claudio hails from Sicily and the two families have made it a new tradition to celebrate Christmas together. This year the guest list includes Claudio, his mother Rita, sister Flavia and Aunt Gemma. "Then, representing our green and pleasant land, are Charlotte, sister Natasha, their half sister Lisa with her husband James and three-year-old Zac, Charlotte's godmother Penny and her daughter Issy, my goddaughter," says Karen. "Then there's a great friend from Easby who is never seen without her entourage of three border collies, and Claudio and Charlotte's poodle puppy Lupo, who is also travelling over from Madrid." Karen isn't at all fazed, though. She loves hosting at Easby, which has just been totally revamped - with an emphasis on greater style and sociability - with the help of interior designers Alyson Savage and Victoria Jeavons

of Barnard Castle's Niche Living. "I wanted to take the hall to another level as the business was rapidly growing," Karen explains. The drawing room is now a multi-purpose room with a large dining table and impressive bar. "My brief for the bar was that it had to have antiqued mirrors and house a fridge and a freezer. It was impossible to source one so Victoria briefed a local company to make one and ensured the wood colour would blend in with the existing antique walnut furniture. I'm thrilled with the result as it looks as though the bar has always been there, despite it being a new and imposing piece. It is a victim of its own success, though - it's a daily struggle to keep it stocked up!" No doubt that will be the case over Christmas when this stylish, multi-functional room will come into its own for eating, drinking and entertaining. Karen had struggled for years to find comfortable matching antique chairs for the dining table. "Victoria sourced some contemporary leather ones, which work perfectly, and also found





a wallpaper sample I knew instantly was perfect," says Karen. "I loved it so much I asked her to source me some china to match. It is a soft calm green which captures the essence of Easby; natural, organic and peaceful."

The existing duck egg blue sofas were treated to pops of colour with orange cushions that match the warm orangey brown floor and furniture. "Finally, Victoria turned up and sprinkled her fairy dust everywhere by placing new candles, trays, vases and other accessories around the room to complete the vision," says Karen. "Our guests have commented on how relaxed, intimate and stylish the drawing room is and that it helps create a great atmosphere."

The redesign brief for Easby's dramatic hall, where the grand piano lives, was dark and moody with bold wallpaper and one painted wall to exhibit Charlotte and Natasha's artwork. Charlotte works in advertising during the week, but is a talented figurative artist producing work for solo exhibitions in the vibrant artistic landscape of Madrid; Natasha studies fashion design at university in Milan. ➔



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Upstairs, the bedrooms and bathrooms also got the Niche Living treatment. "I really enjoy working with Victoria and Alyson as they can create a stunning room from scratch or vastly improve an existing scheme," says Karen. "They appreciate I am trying to enhance the guest experience, inside and out. Grand country hotels may have expansive, stunning grounds, but often do not provide cosy, comfy, intimate areas for guests to sit and chat, read, write, drink and eat. We know that when our guests come they want to spend time in comfort and privacy outside in the scented herbaceous walled garden or overlooking the Abbey. I asked Victoria to make our various seating areas more inviting and the result is so successful that often guests don't want to go out to eat, so we have started offering sharing platters."

Karen is thrilled with the results of the first major redecoration she and John have done at Easby since they undertook extensive renovations after their arrival in Spring 2004. A Georgian house built in 1729, the hall was lived in by the Jaques family for more than 200 years. In 1900, Leonard Jaques added another wing because he wanted a ballroom. This is now the drawing room. His daughter, who caught Spanish flu during the First World War and died, has been spotted on occasion haunting one of the bedrooms. Easby was inherited by her half-brother Robert Jaques, a great gambler who used to drive with his chauffeur in a Rolls-Royce from Easby to Monte Carlo. He sold off land to pay debts and the hall went on to have a chequered

history. One wing was made into flats and the sandstone cellar steps were closed off and covered with concrete. The Clarkes brought this wing back into the main house so the hall is once again how it would have been 300 years ago.

Outside, the Clarkes transformed an overgrown donkey paddock filled with rubble into a kitchen and herb garden which now supplies fresh produce for the business. The Abbey garden has undergone a meticulous transformation, dedicated to accentuating the breathtaking vista, and there are two charming covered areas, The Retreat, complete with a welcoming open fire, and the enchanting glass and stone Summerhouse. Even on a winter's day, these are lovely places for visitors to gather.

"Our guests range from local to international and can be individual couples or families, friends and companies, who sometimes book the hall on an exclusive basis," says Karen. "For the latter, we can bring in a private chef to provide dinner in the candlelit drawing room."

But very soon it will be family unpacking their bags for festivities at the hall. Christmas Day itself starts with coffee and freshly-made cinnamon buns, followed by champagne and presents in front of the fire, "and a new tradition of pistachio panettone from Sicily, which is irresistible and bears no resemblance to the version sold here," says Karen. "Lunch is cooked en masse, while Charlotte and ➔

**KAREN'S CHRISTMAS**

**What will you be listening to?**

Michael Buble Feliz Navidad – it is so joyful.  
Bing Crosby's White Christmas, as my late father always loved it.  
The Snowman – Charlotte, Natasha and Issy used to play the song to entertain us in their annual Christmas Day shows, where they danced and Charlotte played along with her flute.

**What will you be drinking?**

Vintage Champagne

**What will you be wearing?**

A floaty dark green dress and green pixie boots

**What would you like to find under the tree?**

A painting by Charlotte Clarke and a dress designed and made by Natasha Clarke





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Natasha focus on choosing Christmas music and making exotic cocktails or mulled wine which we often have outside in The Retreat with its open fire.”

Even the sun-soaked Mediterranean side of the family have surrendered to the allure of a classic British Christmas, says Karen, and can you blame them wanting to stay in such a stylish and welcoming home with the picturesque backdrop of Easby Abbey? There are language barriers - the older generations on both sides cannot speak a word to each other - but this provides many humorous moments and they muddle through. Charlotte is still frustrated by her mother’s inability to download an app and grasp some Italian. “But it wouldn’t be a cross-cultural Christmas without a sprinkling of linguistic mishaps,” laughs Karen. Buon Natale!

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