

The ultimate man cave

Neil Bouette has transformed a barn into a hideaway that's such a fun place his children use it for parties. By Hugh Graham

Neil Bouette has created the ultimate man cave. The management consultant, 55, spent a year and about £270,000 converting a 19th-century barn into a manly escape from his main home, a 15th-century seven-bedroom house in Shamley Green, Surrey, where he lives with his fiancée, Gina Amies, a lawyer, 54, and their four children.

It has a gym, a sauna, a pool table, a bar, coloured lights, giant hammerhead shark sculpture, *Jaws* posters, a booming sound system, a shower and a curved sofa looking onto a 65in TV. "I like to come here to get away from the children," Bouette admits.



Neil Bouette with his fiancée, Gina Amies, at the £3,397 pool table

He's fast discovering that what could have been a man cave has morphed into a teenage party barn (the couple's children are aged 14 to 17). "It may have been designed as a man cave, but it's been usurped by children," he says, as we survey the debris from a party. "The kids use this place a lot. There's a lot of parties here. Lots of teenagers leaving a mess behind. This is what happens."

Bouette bought the house in 2013 and spent years renovating it. In 2021 he hired Tom Allen from Alco Properties to convert the derelict barn. They received planning permission, but once construction started the brick walls crumbled. The whole thing had to be rebuilt. Bouette received an amendment to the original planning permission, on condition that the new building looked like the original as it was within the curtilage of a listed building. The interiors were transformed.

The original barn had only one floor, but Bouette needed two storeys to achieve his vision. The gym is on the ground floor, the bar and games room upstairs. The new layout is a 1,184 sq ft house of fun. Here's how he did it.

Gym

Bouette hired Mick Rolton from Gymdesignsupply.com to put together the gym. Bouette spent about £12,000 on the equipment. Ceiling heights are key when designing a home gym, so Rolton measured Bouette's height (183cm) and recommended the ceilings be at least 230cm high. They also had to dig down 22mm to fit in the thick rubber flooring. To accommodate the higher ceilings without increasing the height of the building's roof line, Bouette reduced the thickness of the floors upstairs. But

because the first floor was holding up a 285kg pool table, additional slender steels needed to be installed.

Sauna

"There are companies that sell and install saunas from Finland," Bouette says. "Finmark has some great ones. But the Finnish saunas cost an extraordinary amount of money. So I shopped around. I bought the heating element from Finmark for £1,800. But then I got an English company, Oceanic in Wolverhampton, to make the [8ft x

8ft] sauna. It's about a quarter of the price of a Finnish one and just as nice."

Shark

The talking point of the man cave is the hammerhead shark sculpture hanging above the pool table, for which he paid £35,000. It was made by Alastair Gibson, a former Formula One mechanic turned artist, who makes fish sculptures out of carbon fibre and old F1 car parts. "It's made of old bits of Lotus. I saw it in the Drang Gallery in Padstow. I've always fancied it. This is the last of 12. I thought,



The walls are in Farrow & Ball's Stiffkey Blue. Above and right: the sauna and the fully stocked bar area

can I afford that? Then I persuaded myself I could."

The sculpture sparked a theme. The room is dotted with *Jaws*-themed posters as well as shark-themed cocktail glasses and paperweights.

The pool table

The blue pool table ties in with the decor and the shark. If you are putting a pool table on the first floor, plan carefully. "It wouldn't go up the stairs, so before we installed the stairs we had to bring it up on a hydraulic lift and build around it."

The bar

The fully stocked bar has a copper bartop (Zinc Interior Company) and swivel stools, with a full Neff kitchen behind it. "I designed the bar myself. I drew sketches. I got the carpenter, Adam Millard from Alco, to build it for me."

“The sculpture sparked a theme. The room is dotted with *Jaws*-themed posters



Furniture

The decor was inspired by gentlemen's clubs and boutique hotels, according to the interior designer Nicky Hayes of Wonersh Interiors. The room has tiny windows that don't let in much light. "We embraced the darkness and went with dark navy," Hayes says.

The curved blue velvet sofa is a Hampstead (£6,656, Sofa & Chair Company). The ceiling fan was inspired by an old aircraft propeller and is fitting for a man cave (Henley Fan Company).

Tech

The hi-fi system comprises a mix of Denon and Bowers & Wilkins. Bouette installed an air source heat pump, which cost £6,000, and heating is digitally controlled by a Heatmiser neoStat system. He controls everything from his phone. He'll sometimes warm

up the sauna before he gets home from work using his Finmark app. He also has fun with Philips Hue smart lighting.

Total cost

The total cost of the project, with all the fixtures and fittings, came in at about £500,000. Was it worth it?

"I'm much fitter, because it's easier to go to the gym now," Bouette says. "The sauna is a good way to relax when you get stressed at work."

Bouette will occasionally have his mates around, but it's increasingly a hangout space for the couple, who are planning a cocktail party in June, before their wedding. "The whole idea was to have a place that was less formal than the house," he says. "Somewhere we could have fun."

Mission accomplished — a man cave for the whole family.



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