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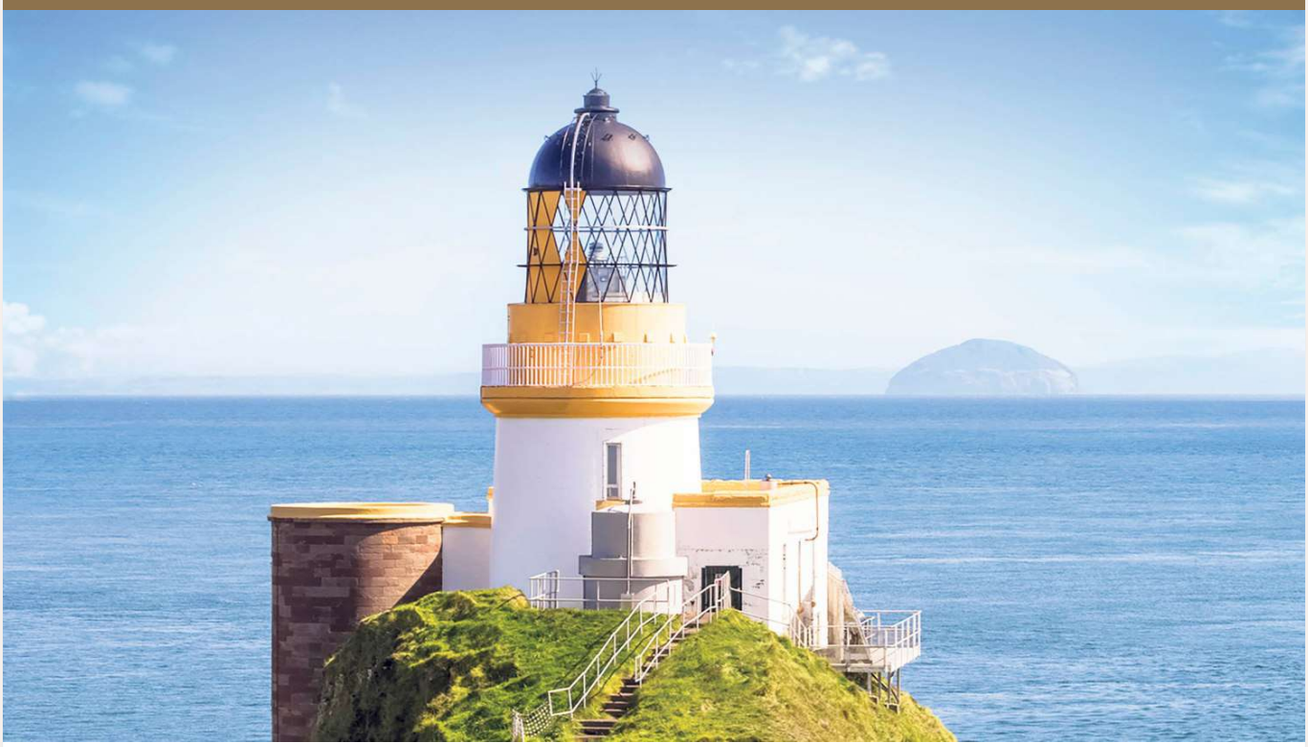
The super-rich escape plan: tunnels, seaplanes and farmland

Property agents reveal the must-haves of the 'super-preppers' — from the Scottish Highlands to the Isle of Wight



Sanda Island in Argyll and Bute, which has its own pub, is available for offers over £2.5 million

Jayne Dowle | Sunday July 21 2024, 12.01am, The Sunday Times

Never mind stockpiling loo rolls and pasta in the understairs cupboard. What today's high-net-worth "super-prepper" wants is an ultra-isolated property with its own solar, wind or geothermal power, a strong encrypted phone signal and a location no more than two hours by road from London and the southeast.

Other must-haves might include a helicopter pad, farming land, a natural spring or borehole for fresh water and an underground bunker with potential to convert to swish accommodation in which to sit out any possible version of Armageddon, be that an act of war, another global pandemic or something too terrible to contemplate.

Spoiler alert. If you've seen the Long Island house with its own luxuriously appointed bunker — complete with huge TV poignantly showing *The Last One*, the *Friends* season finale — where Julia Roberts, Ethan Hawke, Mahershala Ali and their kids hide out as New York City is bombed to oblivion in last year's Netflix film *Leave the World Behind*, you'll already be familiar with the super-survivalist picture.

The rural buying agent Jess Simpson, of Jess Simpson Property Search, is encountering more and more wealthy individuals who want to buy such a bolt hole “just in case”. “Probably since the war in Ukraine started, I’m talking to a lot more people who are looking for a property or smaller country estate which they can get to easily in the event of an emergency,” she says.

“These guys like to be in control. In the back of their minds they’re always thinking about worst-case scenarios. These are powerful people who have everything they want with a click of their fingers, so this is just another thing to add to the list.”

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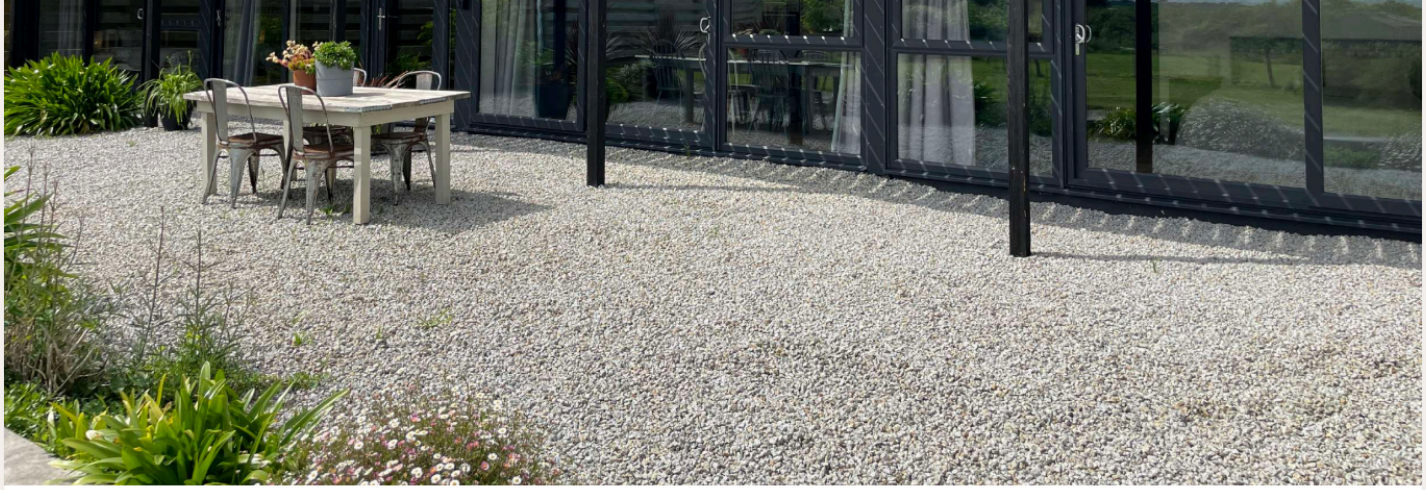
Simpson has had clients asking specifically for properties with bunkers. Another was keen on purchasing a house surrounded by land to grow crops in case food was rationed — or ran out. “They would have fenced it off, but not electrified I think. They were quite peaceful, laid-back types, they wouldn’t have put up too much of a fight. A lot do have shotgun licences, however, which go hand-in-hand with their country estates.”

While some of Simpson’s clients catch helicopters as regularly as Logan Roy, not all do. “The two hours by road thing is quite a big factor,” Simpson says. “Obviously, in the event of a disaster, traffic would be horrendous anyway, but there’s a feeling that heading west from London would be easier than any other direction. Norfolk is an option, but it’s just getting there. If you’re in a hurry you’re going to want to avoid the M25. It would be the ultimate downfall, stuck on the M25 while the zombies ran amok.”



The survivalist-friendly Lowen Barn Trevalls in St Agnes, Cornwall is for sale at £799,950 with Clive Pearce

It's reported that in private Facebook groups wealthy US "super-survivalists" swap tips on gas masks, bunkers, air filtration systems and locations safe from the effects of climate change. One wealthy venture capitalist admits to taking classes in archery, presumably in case gun ammunition runs out.

New Zealand has long seemed to be the destination of choice for these wadded-up warriors. Way back before the pandemic it was well known that Peter Thiel, the billionaire venture capitalist who co-founded PayPal and was an early investor in Facebook, considered the country to be "the future".

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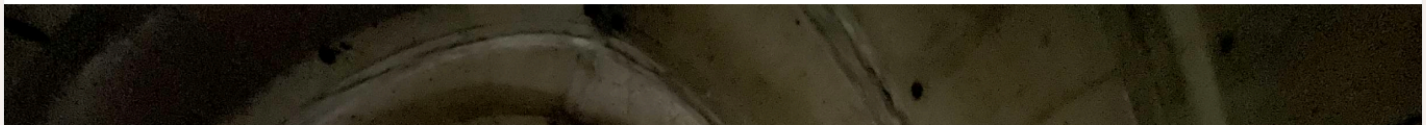
And in 2017 Reid Hoffman, the billionaire LinkedIn founder and a former PayPal colleague of Thiel's, told The New Yorker that "saying you're 'buying a house in New Zealand' is kind of a wink, wink, say no more".

Meanwhile Devon and Cornwall are top of the list for the London-based tech entrepreneurs and captains of industry who want to be able to shift family and staff out of danger at short notice, plus the Isles of Scilly for those who can fly or sail there.

Clare Coode, of Stacks Property Search, first witnessed the trend during Covid: "An ultra-high-net-worth couple in the tech industry bought a remote farm on Bodmin Moor in 2020 and, according to locals, erected barbed wire fencing and CCTV cameras all around the perimeter. There hasn't been sight nor sound of them since. Word from the local pub has it that they found the lifestyle boring."



Lowen Barn Trevalls includes a polytunnel and a 50-person underground air raid shelter

They perhaps made their move too soon. In St Agnes, Cornwall, Lowen Barn Trevalls, a converted barn with three bedrooms (one in an annexe), comes with solar panels, a polytunnel and a 50-person underground air raid shelter, as the RAF had a Spitfire base at nearby Perranporth airfield (still operational) in the Second World War.

A private jet might be handy for a quick getaway when your carbon footprint is the least of your concerns, but a couple of Simpson's clients have told her that, in preparation for potential disaster, they are already learning to fly seaplanes capable of landing on water or land.

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The appeal of an island — or even a sea fort — is clear when chaos is all around. Savills recently sold No Man's Fort off the Isle of Wight at auction for £1.12 million. It has 23 en suite bedrooms, a helipad and appeared in a 1972 episode of *Doctor Who*, in which Jon Pertwee's Doctor fought the aquatic menace known as Sea Devils. Its twin, the armour-plated Spitbank Fort, fetched £1.01 million.

Or perhaps an island in Scotland? Where a seaplane could land, hopefully meeting the two-hour window. "I have had conversations recently where clients joked about how they have a place in the Outer Hebrides just in case the proverbial hits the fan," says Jamie Freeman, country specialist and director at Harington's UK. "When clients talk about moving somewhere completely off-grid in the event of Armageddon, they normally do so jokingly. But, as the saying goes, behind every joke there's usually a hidden truth."

No Man's Fort off the Isle of Wight sold at auction for £1.12 million

ALAMY

"Seaplanes?" Tom Stewart-Moore, Knight Frank's head of rural agency in Scotland, says. "In my experience, with seaplanes in Scotland you tend to get them in the inland island areas. Loch Lomond, for example, has some bigger islands, sheltered. If you were thinking of escaping to a Scottish island — Sanda Island, on sale for offers over £2.5 million, in Argyll and Bute, even has its own pub — it's more likely that people will have access to a fast Rib [rigid inflatable boat] or even a helicopter. A seaplane is a nice idea, but it would be very much weather-dependent up here."

Stewart-Moore acknowledges that while much of his Scottish patch is pleasingly remote, it wouldn't meet the "two hours from London" rule without air transport. "Around Newcastle could be a halfway point between London and Edinburgh, that might be an option," he suggests. A quick check with GSC Grays, an estate agency selling prime properties in the Tyne Valley and Northumberland, confirms there have been no super-survivalist inquiries as yet.

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If the disaster-wise super-preppers are heading west, would Wales be too far? "We have had two general inquiries for something like this in the last 18 months, although neither actually came to fruition," says Carol Peett, founder and owner of West Wales Property Finders, "I think they were both just sussing out whether Wales would be a suitable location for what they were after. Both were from the Greater London area.

"The budget for both seemed to be pretty flexible with a very sizeable top budget, which was what set them apart from usual requests from people looking for smallholdings to live the good life. A remote location being the top priority."

As well as land to keep a few cows, sheep, pigs, goats and chickens and to grow vegetables, these prepping property-seekers wanted a stream, river or pond for fishing or to stock with trout; to be down a long drive/track with no near neighbours; and accommodation for extended family and friends.

The Bowland Estate with a Tudor-gothic mansion in the Scottish Borders is on sale for £18.5 million with Knight Frank

“West Wales is an ideal place for super-preppers as there are a wealth of properties, from farmhouses to mansions, with land and outbuildings,“ Peett adds. “West Wales is very accessible from the sea, and only a short hop from Ireland, and there are a number of aerodromes and airfields suitable for small planes to land. Helicopters could of course land on the fields.”

Black humour aside, stockpiling property assets is a safe place to put your millions if the banks should fail, and could even generate passive income on a grand scale should homelessness ever become endemic. “Therefore perhaps these jokes mask genuine concerns about global instability and the desire for self-sufficiency,” says Freeman. “As geopolitical tensions and environmental crises become increasingly commonplace, the appeal of off-grid living naturally grows. Consequently, more people might seriously consider independence from vulnerable infrastructure as a viable option to safeguard their future against unpredictable global events.”

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Put it like that and the loo rolls and pasta under the stairs seem like a drop in the ocean — which would have to be navigable by seaplane, of course.

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