

DESIGN INSPIRATION > HOUSE TOURS

# Inside Alexandra Tolstoy's Folklore-Meets-Cottagecore London Rental

The avid traveler and entrepreneur isn't afraid to infuse a temporary residence with her signature style.

BY KELLY ALLEN | PUBLISHED: SEP 3, 2025

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When **Alexandra Tolstoy** moved into a four-bedroom, three-bathroom home in **London's** Battersea neighborhood, the rental was in a poor state. Among the major offenders were "horrible laminate flooring" and an **IKEA kitchen** "too awful to waste words on describing," says the entrepreneur, a distant descendant of the Russian writer Leo Tolstoy. Despite a handful of visual faults, she was eager to infuse the rental with her signature style—a celebration of folk craftsmanship influenced by her travels spanning Russia and central Asia.



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"I struck a quick deal with the owners," Tolstoy says. "I would fix it up, with them footing some of the bill and me some, but reduced rent. I am very particular about aesthetics, and rentals usually involve big compromises, so this was the perfect deal for me."

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Tolstoy admired the home not only for its price but its good bones, which touted enviable features like original cornicing and tiled fireplaces. The location, within walking distance of her children's school and a park, also made the residence a top contender in her house hunt, a process that came about rather unexpectedly. In 2020, she had been given short notice to leave her previous home in London's Chelsea neighborhood.

"I had become a single parent in 2015 when the father of my children, the Russian oligarch Sergei Pugachev, fled to France against a UK court order and abandoned us physically and financially," she says. "The Chelsea house was then seized by the Russian government in place of Sergei's debt to them. He was convicted of stealing a few billion USD..."



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Left with no home or financial support, Tolstoy had to act quickly. “I contacted Christie’s, and they organized their first-ever online house sale,” she says. To afford a year’s worth of rent, she sold all of the antiques she had collected. “In that year, I needed to restart my business and become financially independent—quite tough with another lockdown looming and running a travel business.”

Today, **Tolstoy’s travel company** offers curated horseback riding trips through Asia’s Kyrgyzstan. These journeys, along with her other personal adventures in Russia and beyond, define her style at home. “I don’t think I’m influenced by fashions or trends,” she says. “I particularly love folk craftsmanship, probably because I have travelled so much by horse through the simple wooden and adobe villages of Siberia and Kyrgyzstan.”



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Tolstoy has an affinity for natural, handmade, one-of-a-kind pieces. “They tell stories and speak to me much more than more formal furniture,” she says.

Her life approach also fuels her overall taste. “I very much try and follow Leo Tolstoy’s mantra of rejecting the sophisticated for the simple,” she says. “Life is so unnecessarily complicated, particularly in the West, and the closer I feel to nature and real life, the happier I feel.”



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To translate her style to her rental, Tolstoy ripped out the IKEA kitchen and pulled up the laminate kitchen flooring. “We painted the rather damaged boards with the same color as the woodwork (**Black Blue by Farrow & Ball**), and it looked fantastic,” she says.



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She replaced the cabinets with an antique dresser and sideboard for storage, which now houses her collection of Kuzentsov and Gardner porcelain from pre-revolutionary Russia. “[Gardner] made the most joyful plates and tea services, specifically for the central Asian market,” she says. “I first started collecting it in 1999, when I rode the Silk Road on horse and camel. In [Uzbekistan’s] Bukhara, I found a teapot in the old trading domes.”

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Her most significant purchase—and her favorite thing in the house—was a refurbished electric Aga range for the kitchen. “I spent so much time cooking there and working in front of it that I wore away the paint on the floor,” she says. “I sold the only valuable piece of jewelry I had to buy it! But it was a great investment.”

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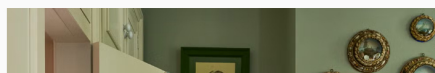
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The kitchen prevails as one room that Tolstoy spends a great deal of time in. “I work from home and always prefer to work at the kitchen table wherever I am,” says the founder of online antiques and vintage shop **The Tolstoy Edit**, who also **rents out an 18th-century cottage in the English countryside**.





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Tolstoy's bedroom and dining room follow close behind as favorite areas to frequent. "My bedroom is always a sanctuary, but I love the dining room too, as I love entertaining and have had lots of fun dinner parties there," she says.





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To polish up the rest of the house, Tolstoy used almost every paint color in interior decorating firm Sibyl Colefax & John Fowler's **11-shade range**. “[It’s] very limited, but each is a fantastic color, full of depth,” she says. “They helped create the feeling of a jewellery box, showing off all our treasures.” (Generally, in the world of paint, Tolstoy would “never use gray or beige.”)



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Tolstoy executed another impactful upgrade in every bathroom. “I used

ready-made panels of tongue and groove by Scumble Goosie to line my bathroom walls," she says. "Waist high, they gave the room a missing solidity and depth, but it was much cheaper and simpler than using the real thing."

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She continues, “They glue on but look fantastically authentic! I used a brilliant **Amtico linoleum** that looks like Victorian tiling for all three bathrooms—again, a cheap but effective solution and aesthetically on point.”

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