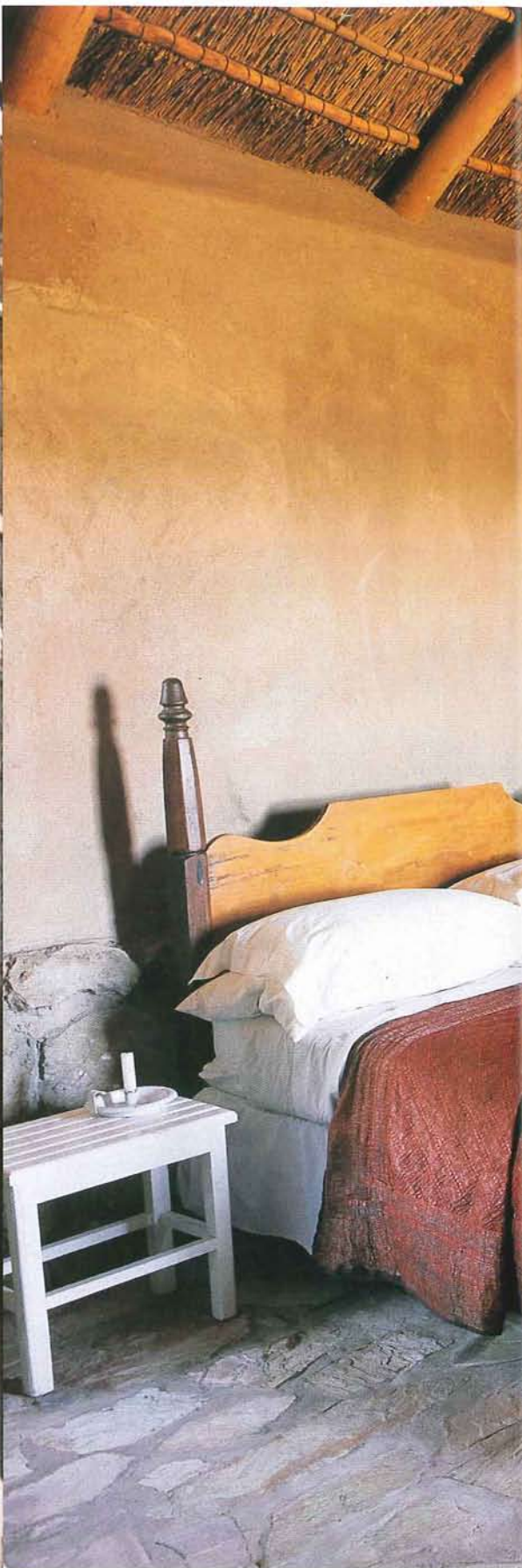
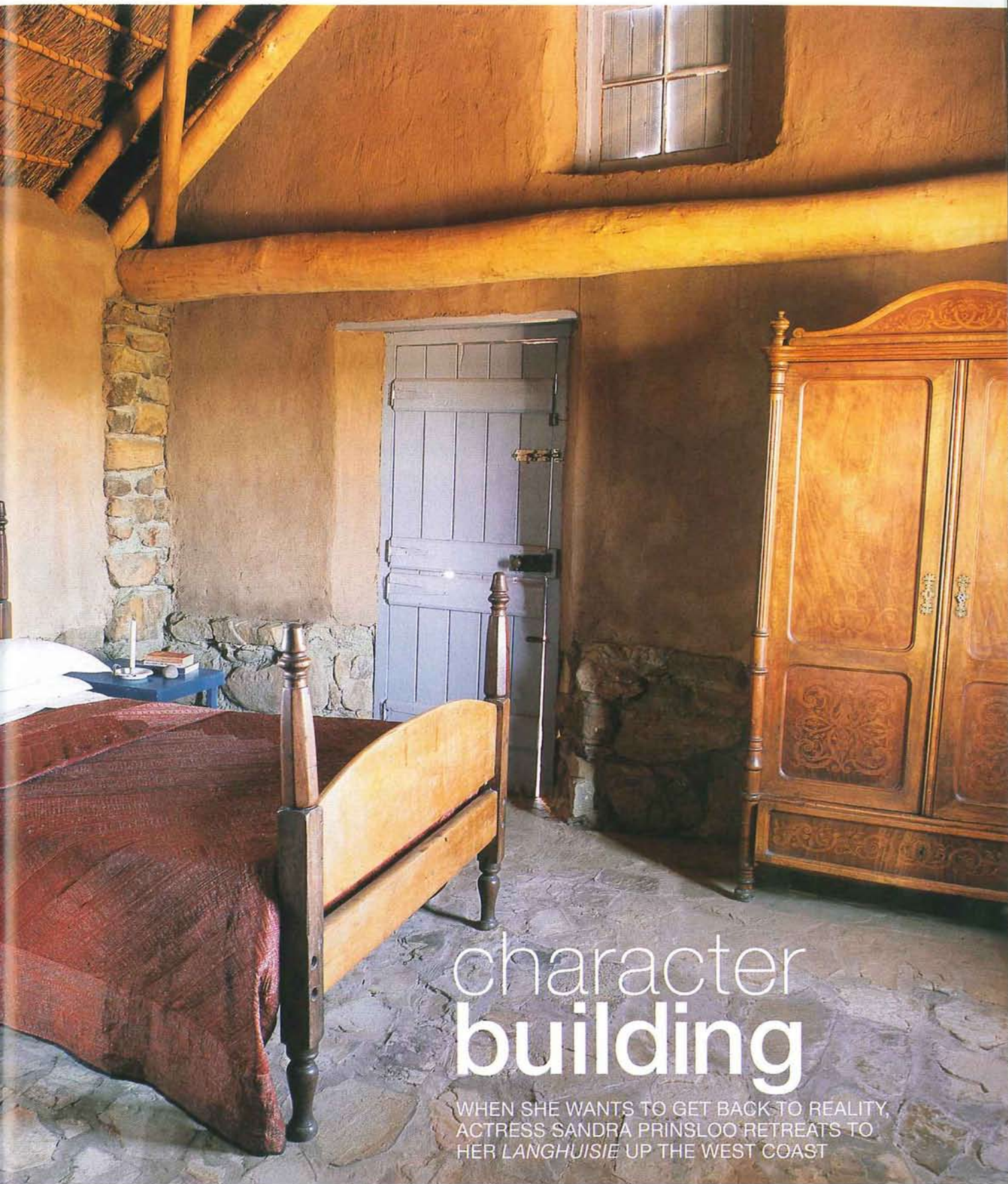


THIS PICTURE Sandra Prinsloo on the Verlorenvlei property. OPPOSITE 'The bed is made of yellowwood and stinkwood,' says Sandra, 'a real old trekker bed, which I picked up in a junk shop and cleaned up. The cupboard was bought sight unseen from a friend.'





character building

WHEN SHE WANTS TO GET BACK TO REALITY, ACTRESS SANDRA PRINSLOO RETREATS TO HER LANGHUISIE UP THE WEST COAST

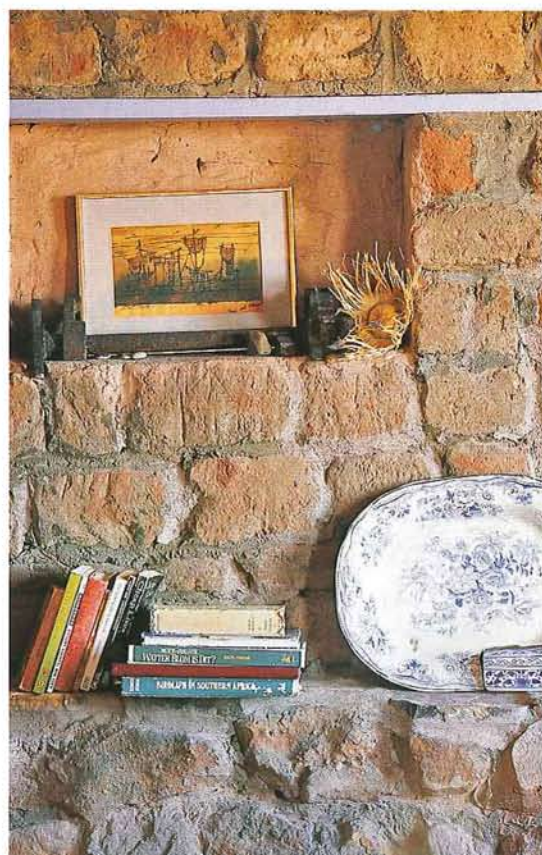


Here in the shallow valley of Verlorenvlei the light changes abruptly. You come upon a group of cottages from a slight incline. At this early hour the shadows play over the facades with their shut stone faces. The sky is the colour of wood ash. Then, in a nanosecond, the whole scene is bathed in smashed sunshine like the splintering of a large looking glass. The long grasses flicker and the *goudblomme* form a dense carpet where, a moment before, there had been a dun-coloured desert. The vlei in the distance lights up with the first morning sun and clusters of pelicans squawk.

Verlorenvlei – or 'lost marsh' – is a wetland area inland from the town of Elandsbaai that's home to hundreds of migratory birds. In summer the European bee-eaters arrive in droves and, if you're lucky, you might see a fish eagle.

Sandra Prinsloo's home in the valley is a traditional West Coast *langhuisie*, the kind built by fishermen. Its structural essence lies in its lowness, a feature often neglected when recreating these houses. Just a few centimetres too high and the authenticity vanishes. And authenticity is the hallmark here – it comes as a surprise to learn that Sandra had the house rebuilt over the ruined original and that it is, in fact, only a few years old. 'I found [the original cottage] quite by chance although I had been here before. There was a country inn up the road where I used to stay. I've always liked barren landscapes. I don't like things to be too lush, so the West Coast with its harsh raw scenery has always been my great love.'

'In the beginning I was going to rebuild it with bricks, but then I read an article about houses made of straw bales. It's cheap, doesn't harm the environment and made so much sense. The architect Etienne Bruwer specialises in it. He didn't build this house, but he gave me lots of advice.'



THIS PICTURE 'The table is a very beautiful old cedar wood one that I found on a film location,' says Sandra. 'They were ironing on it and I said, "Can I buy that?"

OPPOSITE, TOP Sandra found the unusual old hat rack in a junk shop. The simple, slipcovered sofas are perfect for low-key afternoons.

BELOW Says Sandra, 'I love chipped and broken china and never throw away old plates that get broken.'



'The thing with a holiday house is that if it is not completely right, it's completely wrong'





ABOVE The exterior of the house. Another specialist in sustainable buildings, Andy Horn, was the architect who drew up the original plans. Architect Alwyn van Wyk also provided valuable advice, particularly with regard to plastering the outside walls.

OPPOSITE 'The bathroom mirror came from a junk shop in Normandy,' says Sandra.

BELOW The bathroom opens onto a small outside shower area that is, says Sandra, 'my favourite place'.

Part of the house had to be built from stone to carry the weight of the roof. The result is an organic shape with a wobbly surface of mud and clay plastering. 'At that point hardly anyone had done a straw-bale building. It was an experiment,' Sandra says. 'I had no idea if it would work, but at least it was cheap!'

In keeping with the idiom, there are no self-conscious accessories, no tricky features. 'Partly because I've never had time,' Sandra says. 'When I come and live here for longer periods, I must try not to wreck the look by throwing in too much junk. I'm such a magpie. Most things were already here or bought because they were cheap and available. With cottages like this it is so easy to become twee. That's what I wanted to avoid.'

Sandra has chosen the perfect organic palette – ochre, crushed carnelian, rose quartz, clay. The outside of the house is the colour of the first burst of blood from a rare steak. 'The thing with a holiday house is that if it is not completely right, it's completely wrong. With houses that you live in permanently, you can change things slowly. But here, I come for just a few days at a time and I want it to work.' The humble, scrubbed look of things, the complex blend of colours, the play of light on wood and bone make this a house in which everything looks as though it has been there forever.

After years spent acting, Sandra now runs a video production company. 'I love it. We have just finished a video on luxury lodges and safaris in southern Africa. The sad thing is you can't really make a living out of acting in South Africa. I still love the theatre. Acting all those parts over the years has at least kept me from shrinks.' But she says she loves this house because it is the opposite of theatre: plain and real and unadorned. It is a place that requires a sort of passive participation; too much fuss would ruin it. 'Style is really in the heart. I have done nothing here, spent very little money, but I certainly have loved the place. Adored it, really.' ☺

Alwyn van Wyk 083-715-7554

Andy Horn, Eco Design 021-462-1614

Etienne Bruwer designs in natural material such as earth, straw, stone and wood.

For more information, contact him at Greenhaus Architects 021-794-4465

