

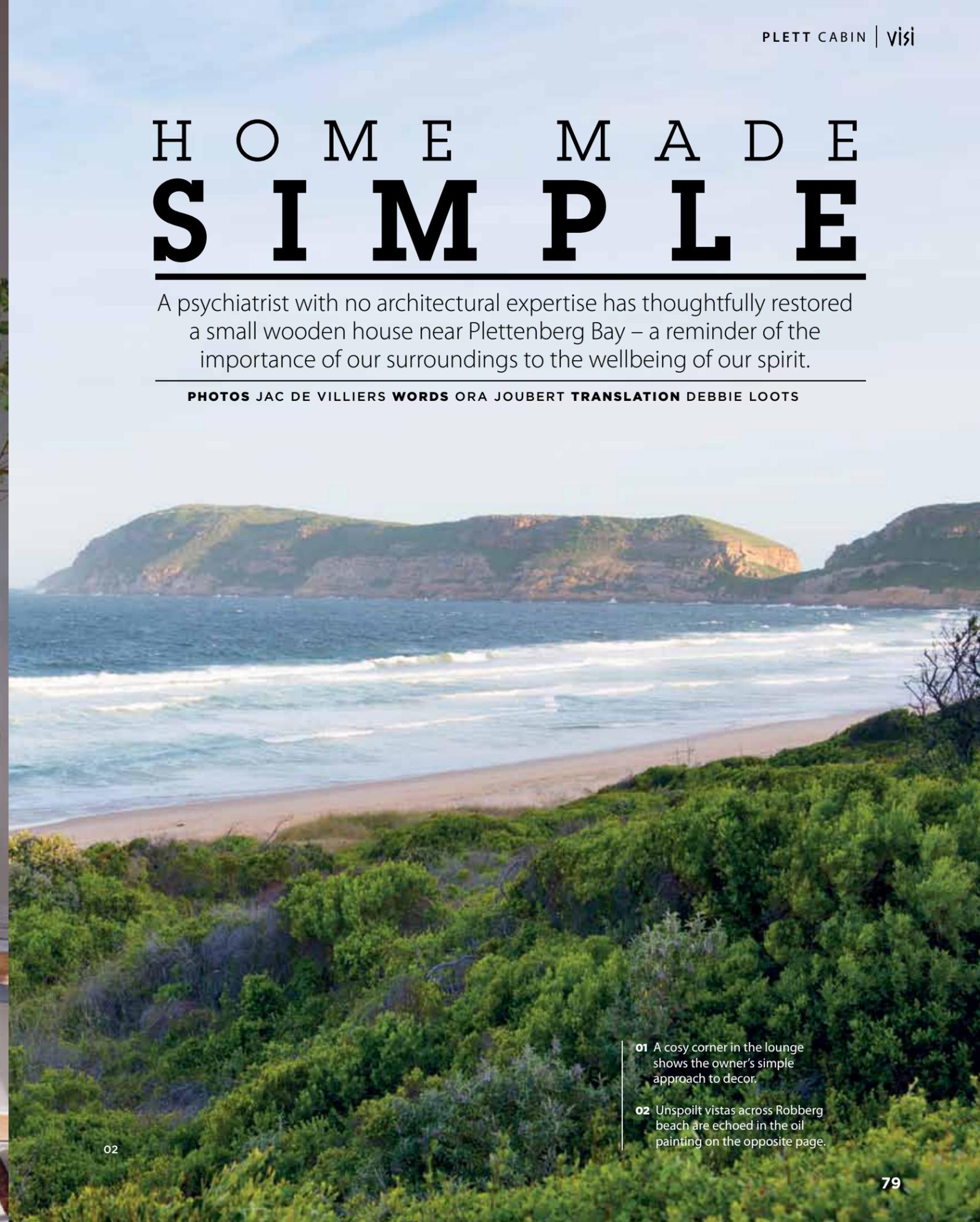
H O M E M A D E S I M P L E

A psychiatrist with no architectural expertise has thoughtfully restored a small wooden house near Plettenberg Bay – a reminder of the importance of our surroundings to the wellbeing of our spirit.

PHOTOS JAC DE VILLIERS WORDS ORA JOUBERT TRANSLATION DEBBIE LOOTS



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01 A cosy corner in the lounge shows the owner's simple approach to decor.

02 Unspoilt vistas across Robberg beach are echoed in the oil painting on the opposite page.



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01 Wooden doors from the previous cottage now serve as tabletops, and sit comfortably with the new furniture.
02 A mix of old and new wood finishes in the kitchen keep the stories of the original *Houthuisje* alive.



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A

ny visit to

the Cape coast, I must confess, is always accompanied by a sense of apprehension. I doubt I will ever be able to identify with the relentless, stylistically suspect large-scale developments that squat in one of the most unique and ecologically sensitive biospheres in the world. Instead, I'm left speechless at the copious design opportunities being passed up to make way for conventional, up-country architectural schemes.

So, I was pleasantly surprised to happen on a modest beach house in a Robberg hamlet, a stone's throw from Plettenberg Bay. Not only is it a manifestation of its seaside setting but, more unexpectedly, it represents the design flair of psychiatrist Dr Pieter Cilliers

in the form of a little wooden house! Perhaps his occupation has given him greater insight?

The history of this sunken little bungalow, *Houthuisie* (wooden cabin), literally just a few strides from the snow-white beach, dates back to the 50s. Along with its neighbours, a few unobtrusive holiday units, it forms part of an agriculturally zoned property of five hectares, right next to the sea. Over the years their various owners – and their children and grandchildren – have resisted the temptation to either plough or develop the land.

Coincidentally, I spent a Christmas holiday with my own family, some 40 years previously, in this same Robberg hamlet, in another little house that, I remember, was held together with spit and God's grace. Now, four decades on, resisting wind and weather, it still looks almost exactly the same! Around here, you see, renovation means replacing a plank or two each year, or perhaps applying a lick of paint when the swollen wooden doors just cannot open or close anymore, or possibly installing another rainwater tank.

Over time *Houthuisie's* wooden construction, like most things, became worse for wear and, just like the fable of *The Three*

Little Pigs, structurally dangerous. So much so that a year or three ago, Pieter finally decided to fix things up once and for all, and replace the "shack" under the existing roof. And, in line with the *modus operandi* of 'n boer maak 'n plan (a farmer makes a plan), this psychiatrist did not obtain expert – read: professional architectural – advice. Instead, he contemplated the way the wind blew and the position of the sea, and thought about the lifestyle and needs of his family of four (and relations) and their annual Christmas holiday, with sand between their toes, and damp costumes and wet spots on the rugs and furniture.

All this mulling and musing finally led to establishing a central room, as wide as the roof span allowed, for preparing food, washing dishes, eating, sleeping, lazing about, chatting and more eating. This spacious area, like three of the five bedrooms, opens onto the broadest stoep that the rafters could cover.

The tiny bedrooms are kept simple, with a loose cupboard and double bed as the only furniture. But they all have the added luxury of en-suite bathrooms (although not much larger than the inside of an airplane cabin), kitted out with a warm shower and a just-above-chest sea view. There's also an extra bathroom with a bath, just next to the multipurpose living area, for when granny visits, as well as a low-slung loft space for the grandchildren – one day.

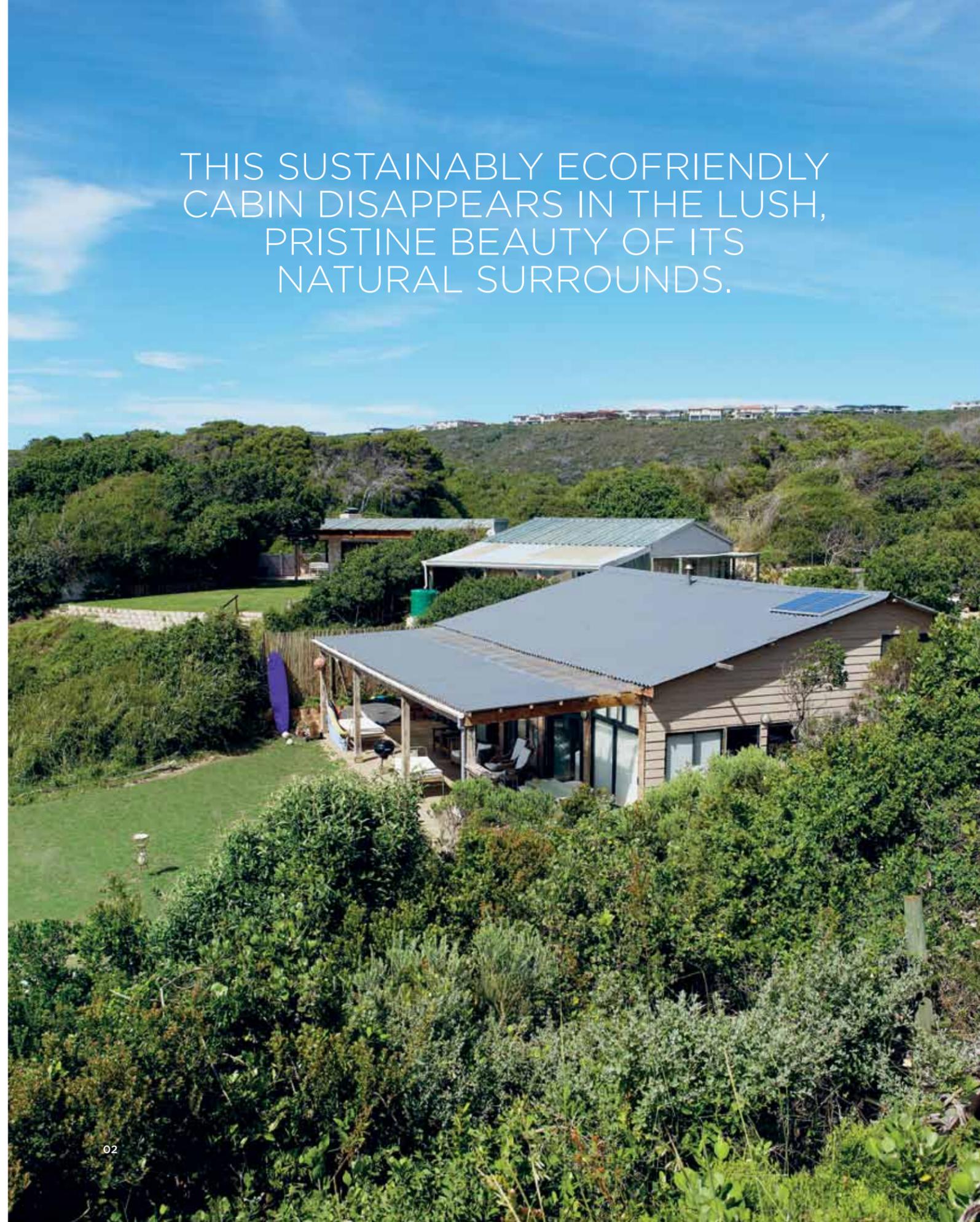
Do not, however, assume that the seeming informality was not planned or isn't tasteful. Quite the contrary. Well-considered graphic artworks adorn the walls and comfortable, stylish furnishings fill the interior.

Apart from this careful and innovative holiday planning, *Houthuisie's* architectural merit lies in its pragmatic, honest structure, without pretence, frills and formalities. Low-key is the mantra as, along with its minimal carbon footprint, this sustainably ecofriendly cabin disappears in the lush, pristine beauty of its natural surrounds. **V**

01 Braam de Villiers, Joanie Combrink and Pieter and Annali Cilliers enjoy the stoep.

01 A bird's-eye view of the cottage Pieter lovingly restored.

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- 01 The bedrooms carry reminders of the house's previous life. The wooden cupboard was once an old soapbox.
- 02 The broad stoep has views to the sea and mountain, while Max keeps watch next to an antique bed.



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