

THE WORLD'S BEST-SELLING HOMES MAGAZINE

# ELLE

PHILIPPINES

# DECORATION

JULIE 2015 P200

## DARE TO DREAM

HOMES FUELED BY FANTASY

**SEASIDE IDYLL**  
AN ETHEREAL BOHOL  
BEACH HOUSE

**YOUNG STYLE**  
CHIC AND FANCIFUL  
CHILDREN'S SPACES

**PLUS! BOLD & BRIGHT TRENDS IN LIGHTING •  
LUXE FATHER'S DAY GIFTS • NOMADIC TRAVEL INSPIRATION**



**Library/study** Homeowner Rory Sweet requested a room inspired by Jules Verne's *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea*. It is filled with artifacts, sculptures, and books on topics ranging from rocket engineering to natural history and exploration. **Property** With its accretion of huts, towers, and domes that cluster around the central living area and patio, The Observatory makes for interesting relationships between its accumulation of parts. ▶



# BETWEEN WORLDS

*A safari fantasy on the Leobo Private Reserve in Waterberg, South Africa, is a display of unfettered architecture and one man's passion for reaching the stars.*

Story by **GRAHAM WOOD** Photography by **GREG COX**  
Production by **SVEN ALBERDING/BUREAUX.CO.ZA**





“It all started in about 2000 when a friend of mine knew someone in South Africa who was selling some land,” says British IT entrepreneur Rory Sweet, who built the spectacular African bush villa dubbed as The Observatory, which overlooks the Palala Valley at Leobo, a private game reserve in the Waterberg district of South Africa. “We thought it would be quite a fun trip to go and have a look at it.” And so began a love affair with a piece of land that, a bit more than a decade later, would be the site of a fantastical holiday home beyond most safari lodge owners’ wildest dreams.

Rory snapped up the 800 hectares on offer at the time. “It didn’t have any accommodation on it, but it was next door to where the lodge is now,” says Rory. He began buying the surrounding farms one by one, eventually accumulating 8,000 hectares, and the lodge as well. “Then we removed all the fences between the farms,” he says. “Along the way, we stocked it with game and we tried to return it to how it used to be, letting it all regenerate.”

Eventually, Rory and his wife began contemplating building a villa for themselves and their children, separate from the existing lodge. “Now we can have friends coming and going while we’re in the house,” he says. The couple asked renowned South African architects Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens to design their vacation home. The husband-and-wife team did the award-winning exclusive resort North Island in the Seychelles that the Sweets have stayed in and enjoyed. While The Observatory was to be a “proper home” for Rory and his family to stay in for long spans at a time, they weren’t looking for anything conventional. Silvio describes it as “a spatial adventure”—rational and carefully thought through, but designed to provide experiences, surprises, and delight around every corner.

The name of the house takes its name from a late addition to the plan: a seven-meter-high tower with a library crowned with an automated rotating copper dome brought in from California, which houses a 20-inch telescope for stargazing. “When we were doing the house,” Rory shares, “we thought a library would

**Main living area** (facing page) The twin forms of a sunken circular lounge and a floating mezzanine “TV nest” create a striking architectural moment. The ceiling below the mezzanine is made from rolled and stitched wildebeest hides, “a take on the Bushveld tradition of leather ceilings,” says architect Lesley Carstens. The knotted balustrade, deliberately crafted to create irregular patterns, is made from dyed rope. The drum lights above the mezzanine were made by halving African drums and adding a linen skirt. All are original designs and collaborations between the architects and various craftspeople.

**Viewing deck** The circular deck with a Jacuzzi is a dramatic spot for viewing sunsets. ▶



be a really cool thing for someone if they wanted to work there quietly. We just had this idea to put an observatory on top, and the whole idea changed into something much more interesting and unusual.” From the study at the bottom level, a covered ladder leads into a gantry filled with things that interest the man of the house: skulls, bones, and other artifacts like military kists and antique book presses. The observatory itself, where the stargazing awaits, is a short climb up.

“The architecture fuses nature through the building,” says Silvio. “We were creating with all the natural materials around us, be it light or water or sunset or texture or animals or timbers.” The Observatory might be a fantasy playground, but every detail has been considered and carefully articulated to mediate an architectural interaction with the bush and refined craft. It’s a profound understanding of architecture as experience.



**Main living area** (facing page and right) The colours of the hides in the ceiling are echoed in the mounds of velvety cushions below. The lounge chairs are by South African designer John Vogel and the "Fat Spot" copper floor lamps are by Tom Dixon.

**Dining room** (below) Seen through antique Indian doors is a four-meter-long hand-hewn table quarried in Limpopo province that is juxtaposed with a massive chandelier made from an entire suspended hippopotamus skeleton. Midcentury modernist Hans Wegner's "Wishbone" chairs introduce an aspect of simple minimalism. ▶



**Knotting, weaving and beading details run like a leitmotif through the interiors, from the swing seat in the main bedroom suite to the recycled fabric ottoman in the lounge.**





**Dining area** (facing page) The bar-  
armoire combines a design of "copper  
cubes offset against black mirror  
and thick African mahogany." It is  
manufactured by fourth-generation  
Italian cabinetmakers in architect  
Silvio Rech's family.  
**Kitchen** Modern and sophisticated  
features (like Corian basins and  
worktops) are clad in thinly sliced  
railways sleepers, incorporating a local  
historical material but made elegant  
rather than rustic. The butcher's block  
is made from a leadwood tree trunk. ▶



**Bedroom suite** (facing page) The four-poster bed is made from hand-hewn and hand-polished leadwood. All the curtains, bed throws, couches, ottomans, cushions, fabrics, and stitching were designed by Silvio and Lesley. The fabrics are hand-dyed natural linen and wools in a quiet, natural palette to complement the colors of the surrounding landscape. (Below) Like the ottoman in the lounge, the woven swing set was made by State of the Nation using recycled fabrics and a textured, unstructured weaving technique developed in collaboration with Silvio and Lesley. **Bathroom** (right) Zanzibari carvings on the shower door frame and the door continue throughout the house. ▶



**The wonder of The Observatory is not just in the spaces themselves, but also in the finishes—the textures, the materials, and the building and decorative techniques throughout.**



**Private decks** (facing page) The rondavels that house the bedrooms have extensive private decks. The carved reclining chair is a traditional African birthing chair. (This page) A sunken fire pit with built-in circular seating provides another vantage point from which to enjoy views of the foresty vegetation. ■

