



OPPOSITE PAGE: Carla van de Veen's mother and child sculpture is set against the dramatic backdrop of sea and sky at Manawa Ridge luxury lodge overlooking coastal Waihi; LEFT: A bamboo land boat from Chiang Mai forms a restful outpost for a weary traveller

PAULA TRUBSHAW VISITS A LOFTY LODGE WITH ITS HEAD IN THE CLOUDS AND FINDS STORYBOOK CHARM IN THIS HOUSE MADE OF STRAW

SPIRALING SKYWARD LIKE a magic beanstalk, Ngatitangata Road starts in Golden Valley just northeast of Waihi, and ends in the clouds.

At its lofty summit I half expect to find a sleeping giant's castle. Instead I find Willem and Carla van de Veen's fairytale lodge, Manawa Ridge.

Overlooking 360 degree views of ocean, mountains and farmland, it is the creative culmination of seven years' hard work and decades of dreaming.

Former policeman Willem, and real-estate-agent-turned-full-time-mum Carla, emigrated to New Zealand from Holland 18 years ago with their three young children, a can-do attitude, and a burning desire to build their own eco-friendly lodge using recycled materials, mud bricks, straw bales, and rustic timbers.

It wasn't until 2000, when their children were fully grown, that their long-simmering dream began to boil over.

Purchasing 100 carefully-chosen Golden Valley hectares, they gleaned building inspiration from books and absorbed alternative ideas from six months of travel to Europe, North America and ultimately New Mexico, where building your own home from a mixture of mud, cow manure and chopped straw is commonplace.

The solid straw-bale and mud-brick construction they've created, working together 24/7, keeps the lodge warm in winter and negates any need for air conditioning in summer.

"Houses today are a bit like chilly bins," says Carla, "they don't breathe. We've always loved houses with a natural feel; building with nature rather than trying to shut it out."

As a result, the division between inside and outside at Manawa Ridge is blurred at the edges.

Instead of perching awkwardly on top, the lodge curls and stretches, like a yawning tabby into the sunny elevated site. ➤

House of Dreams

Photographs and Words: PAULA TRUBSHAW



Knock on the front door - recycled from a bank in Gore - and you step into a different world. Massive jarrah poles and beams, once used to prop-up power lines and bolster Tranzrail bridges, feature dramatically throughout the earthy interior and spill out into courtyards and patios on all sides of the house. Grouped plantings of native grasses, differently coloured flax, manuka, ngaio, cabbage trees, pongas, and carefully placed rocks, merge naturally into the surrounding landscape. A plantation of giant bamboo not only looks good and creates a much needed wind break, it also provides landscaping material.

Although he's had no formal training, Willem is passionate about landscaping. "I spent a lot of time looking at the sun, the wind, and the views to get ideas," he says. "I don't like clutter. I wanted it simple, spacey and natural with lots of rocks. I love rocks."

A feature pond pays tribute to his ardour. Rocks and pebbles pressed into its fresh concrete edges lend the appeal of a stony mountain pool. Soil scooped from the site forms a rock-covered ridge behind the pond and a chattering, pump-generated waterfall.

Plants are allowed to play around the edges of the pond, but Willem doesn't let them paddle.

"I don't want the clutter of plants (in the pond)," he explains, "I just want to see the water, then look out to the ocean, and hear the trickle of the waterfall for relaxation."

His enthusiasm for stone even stretches to the lawn. Pebbles in place of grass negate the need for mowing, are smooth underfoot, and mean one less chore when the van de Veens are busy entertaining guests. >

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: A robust bath especially created by Willem and Carla becomes an artform; Native plants thrive on the exposed ridge; Inside and out Carla's sculptures compliment the landscape; The contours of the man-made lake at Manawa Ridge are deliberately uncluttered to ensure the rock forms receive star billing.

Smooth pebbles also line outdoor spa baths in the exclusive guest units. Unhappy with the design and plastic aesthetics of the shop-bought variety, the couple decided to make their own. Aerated Hebel blocks, hand-sawn, glued together and filed into shape, form the bones of the baths which are then smothered in plaster and lined with river pebble netting tiles purchased from Island Stone Ltd, Mount Maunganui.

Inside one unit is a handbasin hand-carved from Hinuera stone by Carla. An interest in portraiture and life drawing led her into three dimensional stone work more than 15 years ago. As well as gracing homes and gardens overseas and all around New Zealand, her figurative sculpture rambles throughout the house and flows, like everything else, through the bi-fold doors, onto the pebble courtyard and out to sea, eventually merging with the sky.

Beset by a sometimes brutal wind, planting mostly native trees and shrubs was as much a necessity at Manawa Ridge as it was a choice.

"We're right on the knob; if there's wind we'll get it," says Carla, "We spent a lot of money on so-called wind-hardy palms and other plants that just couldn't handle it. We lost many, many plants. It was a learning curve to accept that tussocks, flaxes and other natives are the plants that belong here. It's no use fighting against that."

For more information go to www.manawaridge.co.nz >

