

WHO LIVES HERE? Caren and Dave Mills with their kids Michaela (24), Courtney (22), James (21), Sarah (19) and Josh (14)
WHERE Witkrans Farm, about 70km from Beaufort West in the Karoo
SIZE 301m² (including the 130m² cottage, 36m² bunk bedroom, 45m² loft, 45m² veranda and 45m² garage)

Off the grid, AND into nature

Caren and Dave Mills found their piece of paradise on a remote Karoo farm, where they renovated a historic cottage so they can enjoy indoor-outdoor living year-round.

Text and production Marian van Wyk • Photographs Greg Cox

A new cottage peeks out from behind the historic farm cottage. Thanks to a sensitive renovation, it looks as if it has always been here. Shutters on the windows and doors allow for passive temperature control.

Architecture by Mark Thomas; construction by Wijnand Millard Konstruksie; solar installation by Fermi Solar; structural engineers Hulme & Associates; shutters by Peck's Cupboard Doors

The couple's choice of sofa led to much debate. "Dave doesn't care what it looks like; it had to be comfortable, so we made appointments everywhere and tried several options," says Caren.



After knocking out a wall, the existing lounge (left and opposite) now opens up onto the new veranda on the northern side, and architect Mark Thomas had slide-away doors installed here and in the kitchen on the opposite end for good cross ventilation. For authenticity, he repeated the original gable window seen above these doors in the new loft bedroom (see page 31). A closed-combustion fireplace with an exposed flu keeps this room toasty.

Rocal fireplace from J MacDonald and Sons; pendant lamps from roadside vendors with fittings from Hoi P'loy; armchairs, soft furnishings and cushions by Terry Perlman Interiors; sofa from Klooftique; coffee table from 8 Degrees South; artwork by John Kramer

The Mills's container kitchen (below) was featured in *Home Dec* 2020 | Jan 2021.



Bzzz-bzzz-bzzz," goes my phone as photographer Greg and I are about to lose reception on 70km of very wet dirt road outside Beaufort West. We're en route to Caren and Dave Mills's remote Karoo game farm, and that WhatsApp alert arrives just in time: "Just before De Jagers Pass, there are two *sloots* under water; the first one you need to go through on the right-hand side of the road, and the second on the left."

It comes as no surprise that the couple can drive this unforgiving road with their eyes closed. Whenever they get a chance, they escape to the farm where they recently renovated their cottage, which must be at least a century old. For Greg and I, it's a return trip. We shot the Mills's outdoor kitchen (*Home Dec* 2020 | Jan 2021) at a time when the farm cottage was so basic that Caren and Dave preferred to camp on this former sheep farm.

When Dave first visited the farm in 1999, it had just been converted to a game farm and had almost no infrastructure. "The cottage had a long drop outside, and no running water or electricity. We used to camp and wash ourselves in the river."

Over the years, the cottage got borehole water, but it was still far from comfy. By winter 2021, the couple had made up their minds to renovate. "It's a beautiful farm, but you can't live in a tent for a month," says Dave. "We wanted to modernise the cottage to create a cosy space, so we could spend as much time here as possible."

Caren adds: "I love bringing the kids here; you can actually connect with people. We love the outdoors and this is a place to disconnect from everything else. We can ride our motorbikes and go hiking, cycling or on game drives. Or just chill around the fire."

"The moment you hit the dirt road outside Beaufort West, your whole mindset changes, you switch off," says Dave. >>



Dining chairs from Cielo



Renovating in the middle of nowhere

Aware that their biggest challenge would be to get the building materials on site, the couple started renovating early in 2022 and completed the major work by November that year. Luckily, they had, as Dave puts it, “a hell of a nice oke” on their side: Beaufort West builder Wijnand Millard, who had completed various projects on the farm over the years. “I would send trucks from my business to Wijnand’s premises in Beaufort West, and he would transport everything to the farm,” Dave explains.

Everyone agreed that the simplicity of the cottage should not change, and architect Mark Thomas added bedrooms, a veranda and a garage to look as if they’d always been there.

“We created a second double-storey cottage with a loft bedroom linked to the historic cottage by way of a courtyard and a new bunk bedroom,” he explains. “We used contemporary license with some of the doors and windows, but generally worked with the existing palette of materials.”

The cabinetry was custom made by the couple’s close friends, Vince and Ronelle Muir of Holly Wood Design Studio, who along with Terry Perlman of Terry Perlman Interiors also gave creative input to establish the modern farmhouse look. The premade freestanding units were delivered by a transport company and the Holly Wood team installed them. >>



The vintage scale used to belong to Caren’s mom.
Tea towels from Mungo; kitchen design and installation by Holly Wood Design Studio

The colours in the kitchen were brainstormed by Caren, Vince of Holly Wood Design Studio, and interior decorator Terry Perlman. Vince’s suggestion of Addo Skin (a Holly Wood custom colour) for the cabinets influenced the rest of the colour scheme. The island unit (*opposite*) has a Knysna ironwood top and was built narrow as a space-saver, so Dave and Caren can prepare food on either side. Behind the red barn door, painted in Midas Tomato, is a pantry cupboard. The original kitchen pendants were retained.



The latte ceilings were installed about 25 years ago, and the floor was laid by builder Wijnand Millard’s team, with slate sourced from the farm’s own little quarry. “Wijnand has a sensitive feel for the use of natural stone and timber,” says architect Mark Thomas. The ladder goes to the loft above the dining area, which is used for storage since the children have outgrown the novelty of sleeping up there.

Display cupboard by Holly Wood Design Studio, painted in Addo Skin

Headboard by Holly Wood Design Studio; night stand from Coricraft; pendant lamps from 8 Degrees South with fittings from Hoi P'loy; giraffe wall hooks from Vogel Design; duvet cover from Woolworths; honeycomb throw from Haus; bolster cushion custom made by Terry Perlman Interiors



Tucked between the original cottage and the new cottage, the newly built bunk bedroom sleeps seven comfortably on two double beds and three three-quarter bunks above. "We often have lots of children and their mates here," Dave says.

Beds and ladder custom made by Holly Wood Design Studio; beds painted in Battleship, a custom Holly Wood Design Studio colour; ochre duvet covers and honeycomb throw from Haus; green scatter cushion from Mr Price Home; rust double duvet cover from The T-Shirt Bed Co.; bolster cushion custom made by Terry Perlman Interiors



READER HOME

Shutters and window frames custom made by Peck's Cupboard Doors; cupboards and chests of drawers by Holly Wood Design Studio, painted in their custom Sage Grey; pendant lamps from 8 Degrees South with fittings from Hoi P'loy; throw from Mungo; bolster cushion custom made by Terry Perlman Interiors; brown duvet cover from The T-Shirt Bed Co.; travel bag from Lucy and Muffet



Comfortably off the grid

The cottage's water supply is from a borehole. The Krom River runs right through the farm for 14km and the property has water permanently, thanks to a weir that was built across the river. At the time of *Home's* photo shoot, the river was still high and the main stream that runs across the road to the cottage could only be crossed by a 4x4 with good ground clearance.

The oven, hob and geysers run on gas. The fridges, lights and plugs run on solar power and the family now has all the creature comforts they've ever wanted, down to an icemaker. "Our solar power was installed in two phases," Dave explains. "We used to have two batteries, but then one night at 11pm the music stopped... We now have four batteries which give us 10kW hours of power, a 6kW inverter, and solar panels on the roof. So, we could use an electric toaster and kettle, but it's quite nice not to have everything that one has at home."

The staff cottages used to have no electricity, but now also have a solar system.

Firewood is collected from dead acacia trees along the river. "People might say it's decadent to have two fires going, but I love fire," says Dave. "And there's dead acacia wood everywhere which no one has disturbed, other than us. There are no alien trees on the farm, just some prickly pears and cacti which we chop down." >>

The newly built main bedroom (above left) shares a wall with the hearth in the kitchen, which creates plenty of warmth. Ledges finished with slate sourced from the farm add an old-world feel, while providing display space.

In the new loft bedroom above the garage (right and opposite), architect Mark Thomas added a gable window that mimics the one in the lounge. Here, interior shutters were added as an afterthought, as opposed to all the other windows which have exterior shutters that are more efficient for temperature control. "We simply forgot about these west-facing windows," Caren explains.



In the cooler months, the veranda gets lovely northern sun all day long. "The built-in bench is there for comfort and naps," says Dave. The construction of the roof led to extensive debates between Dave, whose main business is Youngman Roofing, and architect Mark Thomas. Above the timber slats they used a Sunpal polycarbonate panel system from Youngman Roofing, which provides light transmission, thermal insulation and strength. And, indeed, the furniture, including the solid oak table, survives outside year-round, despite the harsh climate.



Table by Holly Wood Design Studio; cushions by Terry Perlman Interiors



Shower screen by Tavasci Engineering; wall tiles from Square Metre Flooring; concrete basin from Lux Crete

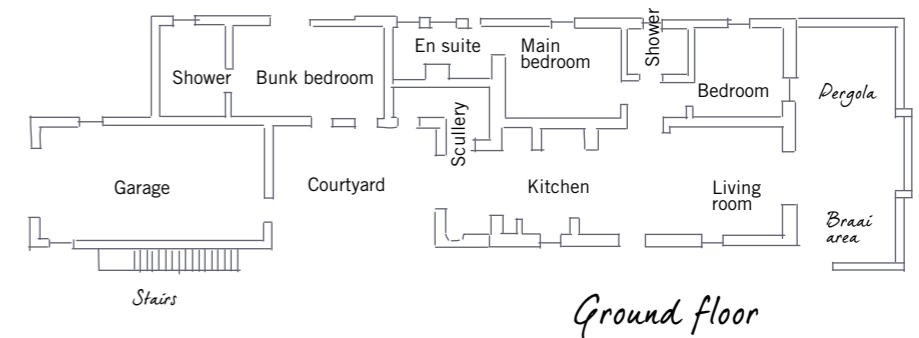
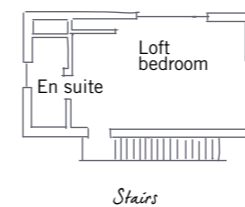


Towels from Mungo; gin from The Karoo Prick Co

About two-thirds of a former storeroom was used to create the main en suite (above left). The old cottage had ochre cement floors in the bedrooms and the couple wanted to stay true to its character, so they asked Wijnand to match these in all the new bathrooms. He used PowaFix Cement Oxide in Yellow. "In this bathroom, we ended up with a slightly richer colour, which works well in the space," says Caren.

Caren and Dave love their KolKol wood-fired hot tub and its view of the Karoo landscape. 🏡

Upper floor



STOCKISTS AND CONTACTS 8 Degrees South eightdegreesouth.com Cielo cielo.co.za Coricraft coricraft.co.za Fermi Solar fermisolar.co.za Haus hertexhaus.co.za Hoi P'loy hoiploy.com Holly Wood Design Studio hollywoodfurniture.co.za Hulme & Associates hulme.co.za J MacDonald and Sons macd.co.za John Kramer johnkramer.co.za KolKol kolkol.co.za Klooftique klooftique.com Lucy and Muffet facebook.com/lucyandmuffet Lux Crete luxcrete.co.za Mark Thomas Architects markthomasarchitects.co.za Mr Price Home mrphome.com Mungo mungo.co.za Peck's Cupboard Doors 021 704 1900 Square Metre Flooring sqmflooring.co.za Tavasci Engineering 082 566 6116 Terry Perlman Interiors terryperlman.com The Karoo Prick Co karoopricks.co.za The T-Shirt Bed Co. tshirtbed.com Vogel Design vogeldesign.co.za Wijnand Millard Konstruksie 082 531 1655 Woolworths woolworths.co.za Youngman Roofing youngman.co.za