

PROPERTIES



A home owned by Rein van der Horst and Arnie van Opstal. They spent about 6.7 million rand, or about \$624,000, to build the 450-square-meter house and rehabilitated a nearby water hole that they can see from their Jacuzzi.



GONDWANA GAME RESERVE

How to build a game reserve? Add a housing development

MOSSEL BAY, SOUTH AFRICA

Sales of housing plots allow husband and wife to finance wildlife park

BY SUE CHESTER

From the time he was a child, Mark Rutherford wanted to own a game reserve. But it wasn't until he met and married Wendy Trees, a New York advertising executive, that his dream began to come true.

Today, they own Gondwana Game Reserve, a 27,000-acre private reserve that is a mix of safari tourism and low-density real estate development.

The site, about 200 miles east of Cape Town, markets itself as the only free-roaming Big 5 game reserve in the Western Cape area. And it is covered with fynbos, a mix of proteas, ericas and restios plants that bloom pink, yellow and violet year-round — a vegetation that the World Wide Fund for Nature says is endangered.

Mr. Rutherford met his future wife in 2003, when a client rewarded Ms. Trees

with a trip to a Kalahari game reserve. He had been asked to play host to some of the group members and, after spotting Ms. Trees, was relieved when she stepped into his Land Rover. Four months later, they were living together in the desert.

"It was a magical time for us, with no distractions and living in such a beautiful and remote place," Mrs. Rutherford recalled.

It also became the catalyst for Gondwana. "We really wanted people to also experience nature on their doorstep as a resident, just as we had — not just as a short-term visitor," she said.

Mr. Rutherford considered looking for affordable land on which to build a safari lodge in Zambia, Mozambique or Malawi, but Mrs. Rutherford's marketing instincts led them to the Western Cape, the region in the southwestern corner of South Africa that includes the Garden Route, a popular tourist destination and vacation home area.

A small group of family and friends provided the initial capital investment, but the couple then had to determine how to finance the rest of the multi-million-dollar project.

The solution appeared when Mrs.

Rutherford's father took them to visit a conservation project in Illinois. The Lake Forest Open Lands Association, a nonprofit organization, buys urban wasteland to restore to its natural state, financing the projects through membership dues, donations and land sales to private owners for small-scale residential development.

In 2004, the couple had bought the first of the eight farms that now make up the

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reserve. They decided to include a low-density real estate development, so they installed underground electricity and water in a 30-mile area and began accepting home site reservations a year later.

Gondwana's 96 home sites — 81 of which have sold — were placed in five corners of the park, leaving corridors for the animals to roam. Four of the five housing areas are fenced to keep homeowners safe from predators. "We fenced in the people," Mrs. Rutherford

said. The one exception is Fynbos Camp, which is near Kwena Lodge, the reserve's 14-suite hotel that opened in 2010.

Each 2.47-acre site includes the freehold title to a building lot of about 300 square meters, or 3,230 square feet. The remaining leasehold land is designated for the homeowner's use and may be landscaped with local plants such as yellow woods, ash, wild plum or grevia, all available for sale in the Gondwana nursery.

Owners may choose a builder recommended by the Rutherfordos or opt for their own design and contractor, as long as they stick to the reserve's environmental management plan and architectural guidelines.

As Mr. Rutherford described them, the residential villas are "tucked in" to the landscape, with a maximum building height of about 6.5 meters, or 21 feet. Many have typical African thatched roofs, although slate and dark tile are also options, and there is a choice of seven earth-tone facades. Metal window frames and corrugated roofs are permitted if they are painted a specific brown to blend in with the surroundings.

Sites begin at 1 million South African rand, or about \$93,000. A turnkey option,

available for three- and four-bedroom villas, starts at 3.5 million rand.

Villas typically face north for all-day sun and are U-shaped, with two bedroom wings that protect the central deck area and its open fireplace from the wind.

Homeowners pay a monthly service charge of 2,390 rand, which includes use of the residents' clubhouse, Lehele Lodge; potable water; refuse collection; security; and the right to use vehicles within the reserve.

The Rutherfordos say they want homeowners to feel part of the game reserve, so they have a social weekend once a year and occasionally organize events such as "Throttle the Wattle," to remove unwanted vegetation.

Many homeowners have donated animals, including rhinoceroses, water bucks and giraffes, to the reserve. Rein van der Horst and Arnie van Opstal, who own a home in the Milkwood Valley area, not only bought two hippos but also rehabilitated a water hole that they can see from their Jacuzzi.

Mr. Van der Horst and Mr. Van Opstal had planned to buy a winemaking estate in Franschoek, an area east of Cape Town, but changed their minds when a friend called. "He was standing on a

plot in Gondwana and told us that it was so beautiful that we had no other option than to buy it," said Mr. Van der Horst, general manager of Genpact Africa, a business consulting firm.

The site, which they bought in 2007, is in the reserve's walking area, a 2,500-acre belt with extra-high fencing so homeowners and tourists can hike, fish, bike and picnic in safety.

The couple hired the construction company that built Lehele Lodge, and paid about 6.7 million rand for a 450-square-meter home. The three-bedroom house has a kitchen that they imported from Europe and a basement with a wine cellar, sauna and home theater.

In 2012, they invested in an adjacent plot, where they built a second house with 250 square meters of living space and 100 square meters of decking.

They visit every other weekend from their Johannesburg home and spend most of their vacations at Gondwana. "We love sitting on our deck, watching the zebras drink at our water hole and eland graze in the 'garden,'" Mr. Van der Horst said. "One of the funniest moments was an ostrich tapping on the window when it saw its reflection."