A Cape Dutch home with a French twist, reflecting the Franschhoek Valley’s twin European heritage and the couple’s own travels around the world.
I dream of Africa

By Tracie Anglo-Dizon
Photographs by Jay Sala

This couple left their urban lives behind and built a mind-blowing home in South Africa
The main lounge features a collection of tables—an oak and iron coffee table from Pierre Cronje (Cape Town) and a stretched leather and metal coffee table and a consul table fashioned from an old mechanic’s worktop both from Ministero del Gusto (Marrakech). All interspersed with side tables from Budji Layug (Manila), Lamps from Pezula (Cape Town) and Pierre Cronje. Sofas and lounging chairs from Dominico House (Cape Town) and a local artist in Milan. Books from anywhere and everywhere.

When José “Lit” Cortes finally decided to leave investment banking after 20 years in the industry, he didn’t just quit his job. He also bid adios to Hong Kong and moved to South Africa 10 days before the 2010 FIFA World Cup kicked off. A cofounder of Asia to Africa Safaris, Lit had been dreaming of Africa since the fall of apartheid in 1994, when Nelson Mandela aroused the world’s interest in South Africa. And since he was now in the business of convincing people to go on safari and visit Africa, he wanted to put his money where his mouth was and actually live there.

But his African dream of living on a farm, albeit a luxurious one, in the African bush amidst marauding lions and leopards was a tad too adventurous for the couple who also seriously considered a Parisian townhouse in the Marais district. So they settled on an idyllic French village surrounded by dramatic mountain ranges in the heart of the South African winelands, seemed to tick all the boxes.

For the couple, buying the house—two original Cape Dutch houses combined in the 70s to form one sprawling house—was easy enough. Making it their own was another matter entirely. Since Franschhoek is a Cape Heritage village, approval from various committees, including an aesthetics committee, had to be sought before any renovation took place. The rule was that the Cape Dutch architecture should not deviate from that of the rest of the village, in order to preserve the spirit of the original settlers of the area, the French Huguenots who first settled in 1688. Approval took an agonizing six months, and the renovation another six. After a year of hard work, the house still looked like a Cape Dutch house on the outside, thanks to Franschhoek architect Dionne Gurr. Inside, it was time to decorate.

Inspired by some of the French chateaux they stayed in during their honeymoon, and with some guidance from Gigi O’Connor, owner of Dominico House in Cape Town, the couple transformed the ground floor. The area can best be described as Cape winelands meets French Provence. The central garden evokes the gorgeous gardens Lit and Kitty visited in France’s Loire Valley. The living areas are comprised of a yoga studio for the wife, a wine cellar for the husband, an open kitchen, a patio which opens out to the garden, a work area, and numerous lounge areas to wile away the hours.
Clockwise from top: In the lounge sentimental old sofas are re-upholstered, lamps are from China Art (Hong Kong) and Ministero del Gusto (Marrakech), Lit’s photographs (shot in Botswana and Zambia). Lit’s safari photos are occasionally projected directly onto the high volume wall, in place of the framed photos, from an installed ceiling projector. In the study, work table from Hope Garden Furniture (Cape Town) and an old school desk from Finders Keepers (Cape Town).

Artwork/paintings from Filipino artists such as Marcel Antonio, Onib Olmedo, Malang Santos, Ben Cabrera, Cesar Legazpi, Steve Santos, and a South African artist—Kevin de Klerk. Chandelier from Belgium. Argentinian cow rug from the Marais in Paris. By the fireplace, a daybed from Lane Crawford (Hong Kong), hat rack, a flea market find in France. Another safari photo by Lit above the fireplace (shot in Tanzania) and white kudu horns from Kooperasie Stories (Franschhoek).
The second floor houses the guest bedrooms and den, which are all under thatch. Here, the look is Out of Africa meets Parisian atelier. Like true global nomads, the Cortes couple have decorated their place with scavenged pieces, such as animal horns from their safaris, driftwood from African dams, console tables from Morocco, indigenous cowhide rugs and modern art from South America, rare parrot and macaw feathers from the Amazon, hat and umbrella racks from flea markets around France, antique cabinets and chests from Tibet, Bhutan, and India, and, closer to home, pieces such as their glass and metal/bamboo dining table from Budji Layug in the Philippines. The living room couches and most of the outdoor furniture were sourced locally from designers in Cape Town, the design and quality exceeding their expectations.

The couple, who in their previous life as Hong Kong urbanites couldn’t even plant a seed, are now avid gardeners and even grow a multitude of vegetables and herbs that more than satisfy their daily requirements. They lovingly toiled and transformed their garden into the stunning manicured grounds it is today, thanks in part to a lot of good advice from their friend, the renowned landscaper Sue Norman. On good days, which seem to happen most of the year in this part of the world, they practically live outdoors, with Lit doing most of his work in the patio while keeping a relaxed watch on his pet crocodile Steve and their growing koi population. Fortunately, their six-month-old puppy, a Rhodesian ridgeback named Bella, is not the jealous type.

But the best thing about the house may be its location. Once a sleepy town, Franschhoek has become the gastronomic capital of South Africa, and home to eight of the top 50 restaurants in all of Africa, thanks in part to world-class chefs who have decided to make the village their home. The valley has an ideal climate, with alpine air and zero pollution, close proximity to Cape Town, and a strong wine culture. And the house is literally a three-minute stroll from top restaurants such as the Tasting Room, Reuben’s, and Le Bon Vivant on the main road, and a mere five to ten-minute drive from some of the best wine estates in South Africa.

One can conclude that the Cortes home in Africa is truly civilized. Seeing the glorious ever-changing view of the mountains—which sometimes become snow-capped in the winter—and endless vistas of vineyards and valleys from their backyard, is something out of a dream.
French doors open up into the beautiful garden allows indoor/outdoor lounging. Sectional sofas by Weylandts and ‘chaise longue’ by Budji. Old teak coffee table from Indonesia.
Above: A panoramic view of the house from the garden shows the Franschhoek mountains at dusk. Left: The kitchen opens up to the patio and dining area which then opens up to the garden which is surrounded by mountains.

The French doors open up completely to the garden and to views of mountains and vineyards.

A bath with a view. A Victorian bath tub adds character to simple contemporary fittings on a crisp white palette.
The media room boasts of a jagged wood ceiling designed by the owner/architect primarily for acoustic purposes, to cushion sound, but is also aesthetically interesting as a design feature. The room was inspired by one of the couple’s favorite safari lodges in Botswana. Safari memorabilia such as old safari pith helmets to campaign furniture to antique Boer war rifles and an extensive personal collection of books on African safaris and wildlife and African history dominate the library.