



The bunk beds in the kids' room were made in situ from driftwood collected by the family.



Homeowner Rhian Berning with her husband, Stuart Palmer, and their children.

## heart & soul

Situated just outside Plettenberg Bay, this offbeat, off-the-grid and utterly charming cottage might just be the perfect place to raise children

Text & production Emma Jordan Photography Vanessa van Vreden

“Home is my creative space,” says Rhian Berning, standing in a kitchen jumbled with cutlery in jugs, mismatched crockery, wild flowers and rambunctious hounds. She’s just taken a soup off the stove and put it in a hotbox. For those, like me, who don’t know what a hotbox is, it’s a box (with a lid) that has a woollen beanbag inside it, and is essentially a nonelectric slow cooker. Rhian would have one of these, and use it often. As the founder and director of Eco Atlas ecoatlas.co.za, South Africa’s only all-green resource, she lives by her ideology. But that’s not to say she, or her house, is hippieish. “I would say we live with mindfulness,” she says. “We’re aware of the resources that we use and the sense of everything being interconnected. We’re mindful of what is coming in and going out, and of course having young children, I’m very mindful of what’s entering their systems: good food, good water, good air.”

Rhian lives on the edge of a fynbos forest five kilometres outside Plettenberg Bay with her husband, Stuart Palmer, and their two children, Anela and Zanda. The house is on the margin of her parents’ property and was a worker’s cottage when Rhian was growing up and her mother farmed goats. “I would horse ride past here when I was a little girl,” she says. What happened next was life: Rhian moved to the big city (to study at the University of Cape Town) and travelled the world (including six months travelling alone through Africa in 1998 and a stint on the back of a motorbike in southern Europe) before she moved back to the farm cottage with Stuart and baby Anela in tow. “The solar generators had been stolen,” says Rhian, “so we lived without electricity for six months. With a five-month-old, it was certainly challenging.” Previous tenants had already added the

stoep that runs the length of the house and has views through the valley to the sea. The Berning-Palmer family built on the new kitchen, which is the heart of the home. “It’s how I grew up,” Rhian says. “That’s why we have the dining table in the kitchen – it’s where everything happens.”

The furniture in the rest of the house is clearly all family-oriented too: most of it is inherited, dates back to the couple’s childhoods, or was a wedding gift. “As one grandmother died a whole lot of stuff came into the house, and then another grandmother died and a whole lot more stuff came in,” she says. “Everything here has a story. There’s a history and a memory of where things come from; it’s that idea of mindfulness again, understanding that messages can be passed along through objects. When you hold something you have a connection with the person who gave it to you.”

Rough translation: there’s a lot of love in this house. The children’s bunk beds were built in situ from driftwood the family collected. The beds are covered with quilts – Anela’s was made for her second birthday with squares of fabric given to her by her and Rhian’s friends. Zanda’s was a gift given to Rhian at her baby shower – again, made of squares from all her friends, with the fabrics carrying messages of love and hope for the then-unborn child. “My children are sleeping under the love of all those people who gave them those blankets and quilts,” says Rhian.

A lot of people gravitate to Rhian’s home: lunch parties can go on until the early hours of the following morning. Rhian says that most people who walk through the front door – which is more accurately a back door, entering onto the kitchen – say something along the lines of: “I love your home, it has such a feeling of love.” And Rhian agrees, saying that she loves the fact “that it has a feeling of home, that it’s an external expression of love – a home, not a house.”



Previous tenants added the stoep, which has far-reaching views over the Bitou Valley down to the Indian Ocean.



Everything in the home has a story: the bed was commissioned by Rhian’s parents as a wedding gift.



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An exterior view of the Berning-Palmer family home.