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CORFU | GREECE



Our Greek adventure

On the island of Corfu, a Stellenbosch couple have transformed a dilapidated old house into a beloved home. Here, surrounded by cherished belongings collected from around the world, they are starting the next chapter in their life . . .

BY SUZETTE TRUTER PHOTOS HELENE VISSER



▲ SPRINGTIME

In spring, the island is covered with flowers that one can pick and take home.



▲ ALMOND HOUSE

An ancient almond tree grows in front of the house, which was built from a hard limestone called almond stone.

Corfu photo Getty Images



◀ COVID PROJECT page 54

The yellow dining table and chairs were a Visser family project during lockdown. Each member helped to paint the furniture which was bought from Odds & Ends in Somerset West. The wooden wardrobe in the back is from an antique dealer that has since closed, and the dark dresser was bought at an auction. The pewter plates were collected over many years.

▲ ICONS AND STONE

The small guest toilet on the ground floor looks like a painting. The stone walls were kept intact, but the rest was modernised. It was decorated with religious icons and pictures, and modern tiles were added. The old mirror is a second-hand find.

▶ A PASSION FOR CUPBOARDS

Hein can't resist a lovely cupboard or wardrobe. He bought this one at an auction and it now houses his large collection of music. On the wall above it are more of their white-and-blue porcelain plates, and some field flowers decorate the cupboard.





◀ WALL FOR A TAPESTRY

Middle left Their Greek builder could not understand their request for a wall in this spot. He would have preferred to install a bar counter, but Hein insisted that the Belgian tapestry he bought at Piér Rabe Antiques (pierrabe.com) in Stellenbosch needs to hang here. The kitchen is partly hidden by the wall. The red lilies on the table grow all over the island – even on the roadside.

◀ THE LIVING ROOM

The living room is next to the dining room and once again filled with interesting items. They bought the large painting (behind the twig arrangement) in Budapest and then carried it home in their hand luggage. The chest in front of the brown Wunders sofa (wunders.co.za) provides storage for their table linen.

▼ COME AND LIE DOWN

Below right This old wooden daybed under a lounge window comes from the farm they had in Calitzdorp.

▼ GOURMETS

Below left All the Visser women are excellent cooks. Karla, the youngest, is a trained chef. When they are all here at the same time, they spend hours discussing menus and the results are always delicious.



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he house was a ramshackle place. The plaster was flaking, the shutters were broken and the garden and rooms were littered with junk. But up in those green hills on the island of Corfu, Stellenbosch architect Hein Visser had a magical moment when he first saw the place that would become their retirement home. “There was a kind of spark. I just knew *this* was the one,” he says.

His wife, Helene, was hesitant, even though she found the house “charming in its derelict condition”. With the weak rand in mind, and a long-distance building project looming, she could not imagine how they would cope with all the work. “But I saw Hein already had this vision – and so I agreed.”

After more than two years of renovations and cross-continental communications, a few misunderstandings with their Greek builder and lots of patience, Almond House was finally ready in April 2022 – just in time for Hein’s sixtieth birthday party. Their beloved new home.

The 150-year-old house was the undisputed star of the day, with its authentic stone walls, pretty, light grey shutters, new roof from original quarry tiles and small balcony overlooking the green ridges, olive trees and cypresses so typical of north-eastern Corfu.

Inside, where there used to be a gigantic olive press and a surgery (the previous owner was a doctor), is now a huge open-plan area with a lounge, dining room and kitchen. Helene has created a cosy atmosphere in her unique and eclectic style, combining various elements that simply work well together: a beautiful cabinet from Holland, a slightly worn vintage couch, muted velvet cushions, a copper bell, old tapestries, a table with mustard-coloured legs . . . each piece somehow appearing to belong just there.

Most of the furniture and other homeware came from their Calitzdorp farm; they packed as much as they could fit into two shipping containers. They knew these pieces would look good in the charming stone house with its beautiful wooden beams. “The shabby chic, lived-in appearance works just as well here in Corfu as it does in the Little Karoo. In fact, this landscape reminds me of that part of South Africa,” says Helene.

She believes her décor style is mostly an English country atmosphere combined with Dutch elements. “Hein prefers a more classic, formal style. Sometimes we’re quite at odds over décor decisions, but we always come to an agreement. We have learned to compromise!”

Before the shipment, they worked together and planned the layout of each room. They measured the exact position of every single standalone wardrobe and cabinet. Neither is fond of built-in cupboards – something their builder, Lefteri Tsoukalas, struggled to comprehend.

Hein has a weakness for cupboards. “To me, a cupboard with good proportions has the same appeal as a building with good proportions. And one always needs storage space,” he explains. It is also ideal for exhibiting all their “collections”.

Throughout the house, they have created various displays by grouping together similar items, like their English brown earthenware and pewter plates from different countries. “It has more impact than single items.” In the kitchen the eye is immediately drawn to Helene’s striking collection of blue-and-white English Cornishware and assorted white enamel bowls from South Africa. All of it collected over many years.

While others might have flocked to a rugby game on Saturdays, Helene and Hein preferred to browse antique shops, rummage sales and auctions when they had spare time. “Our daughters, Jana and Karla, hated that when they were younger, because we always dragged them along. We sometimes found the most beautiful furniture and décor items at a bargain price. Everything in this house has a story.”

They are very glad that Jana and Karla, who currently work in Belgium and The Netherlands, just love the atmosphere of the new home – it reminds them of the farm.

“For eighteen years, the farm was our haven, a place where we spent wonderful times with family and friends. After we had sold it in 2019, we wanted to recreate that sense of hearth and home here for ourselves and our daughters, surrounded by all our cherished belongings,” says Helene.

Almond House is currently their holiday home. Hein still has a full-time job as an architect in Stellenbosch, and Helene works as a florist at Tokara Wine Estate, but they aim to retire on Corfu in 2025.

They’ve been planning this next chapter in their life for quite a while now. “It is a new adventure. We want to travel more after retirement. Initially we intended to retire on the farm, but I did not feel safe there any longer. It is also more convenient and quicker to explore the world from here, especially for Hein who does not like flying. And it is closer to our children, in case they want to settle in Europe,” she says. (Jana is a textile artist and Karla a food product developer.)

Greece was so to speak a natural choice. During previous vacations, the Vissers had always enjoyed the Greek lifestyle, the climate and the laid-back nature of the people. Hein also appreciates their strong family values. “And they are friendly, open people. I’ve never met a Greek who thinks they are grander or smarter than someone else,” he jokes.

The couple first had their eyes on the island of Lesbos. It is still authentic, affordable, green and open throughout the year. (It doesn’t close down after the tourist season, as the drier islands do.) But in the light of the refugee crisis there, they investigated other green islands and fell in love with Corfu. >



FROM THE VELD

Helene always carries a pair of garden scissors on her long walks. These wild-onion flowers grow on the mountain paths.

< Helene, an enthusiastic swimmer, enjoys the many small bays with their turquoise blue water. Krinias, their little hamlet, is about six minutes' drive from the nearest beach. And Hein finds peace of mind in the surrounding landscape. "It is so satisfying to sit and admire the play of light on the silver-grey leaves of the olive trees and the cypresses growing all over the place," he says.

When Helene is here by herself, she likes to explore the hills around the house. There are many walking trails to other hamlets in the area. It is not unusual to come across a group of hikers along the way. The odd Greek trader in a delivery van peddling fish, fresh vegetables or live chickens, is almost the only "traffic" that passes their house.

She often returns from her walks with bunches of flowers such as alliums (wild-onion flowers), cornflowers, lace flowers or purple honesty flowers, all of which grow abundantly in the fields and bring a touch of colour into the home.

The same goes for the bright red geraniums in their blue-and-white containers (feta-cheese tins which she had salvaged from the rubbish heap) on the outside table. Almost every house has a geranium or two in full bloom.

Apart from three brightly coloured rugs and throws that Hein and Jana discovered in an old chest on the top floor, their house has hardly any Greek elements. But in the kitchen, they regularly cook up Greek dishes. Helene has always loved their cuisine and she serves a mean moussaka, stifado (beef stew), kolokithokeftedes (courgette balls), tzatziki, and, of course, anything with feta . . .

ABOUT ALMOND HOUSE

There is not much information about the history of Almond House – named after the almond trees that grew in the yard many years ago. When the Vissers bought the house, it had been unoccupied for twenty years. Like many homes on Corfu, the building was influenced by the Venetian style – the island was ruled by Venice for more than 400 years. The houses on Corfu have more classic proportions, usually with a door in the centre flanked by two windows, and often are double-storied, says Hein.

He realised that you need to completely trust the builder when you tackle a long-distance project. Lefteri is a thorough workman and is fluent in English – which was a good thing, since his subcontractors could not understand a single English word. The biggest challenge was to stay patient when the building project dragged on – Greek leisureliness! Labour and craftsmanship are both expensive and scarce. All the construction work was approved by an archaeological body on the island.

The house with its beautiful "bone structure" met all Hein's expectations!

Thanks to Carl Daeche, their estate agent, they know where to find the best local eateries and already know quite a few people. They immediately hit it off with Carl, an ex-Brit, and his wife, who have been living on the island with their family for the past twelve years. Whenever they dine out with Carl and Lefteri and other friends, they do it the Greek way: Everybody shares everything on the table, you rarely order your own plate of food.

They do not have many close neighbours, except for the elderly Greek woman who last year welcomed Helene with a bottle of her own olive oil. Many locals harvest their olive crop and then have the fruit pressed at the co-op in order to have their own oil. "We used to greet each other with *kalimera*, *kalimera* [good day], but I only realised how little English she understood when I invited her over and asked: 'Café or té, café or té?' Trying to make her understand what I meant, I held out a packet of rooibos tea . . . which she eagerly accepted and quickly left with the packet wrapped in her apron!"

Each day, they discover something new about the Greek way of life. In April this year, when they returned from South Africa after an absence of ten months, they were met by a thin layer of mildew on everything, from the chairs to the linen. Now they know that a dehumidifier is essential when they are gone for long periods of time.

They still have many ideas for the house. The garden will be the first of many projects. "I can already imagine myself working in the vegetable garden once I'm retired," muses Hein. It is a work in progress, he says.

But Almond House is already a pleasant place to live and entertain. They have no regrets about their purchase. "I've never in my life felt as free as I do here," says Helene.

vkdb.co.za

▶ LEFT BEHIND

Above left When clearing the house before the renovations started, they found these colourful throws and rug. They now have a place of honour on the top floor. The paintings are by the South African artist J.P. Meyer.

▶ FULL OF CHARACTER

Above right A small still life with a candle and millstone from the Karoo.

▶ THE MAIN BEDROOM

Various patterns have been combined seamlessly. The dressing room and bathroom are hidden behind the dry wall. The finish for the wooden floor has not yet been decided, but for now it has a bleached look. Remember: Woodoc has a huge selection of wood-treatment products.





◀ **PRETTY PICTURE**

The old painting of hollyhocks, still in its original frame, creates a lovely tableau with the fresh flowers from their garden.

▼ **DISCOVERY**

Below right The Vissers always make discoveries on their walks, like this dilapidated house surrounded by wildflowers.

▼ **SMALL GALLERY**

Below left An interesting collection of paintings and other items draws the eye to this corner of the lounge.

▶ **TWIN BEDS**

Hein bought this unusual set of bedroom furniture at an auction. There is also a curved dressing table, which can't be seen in the photograph. Helene bought the cheesecloth throws in the older part of town, called Kerkyra by the locals.







◀ DOWNTON ABBEY

The cupboard in the dining room was Hein's labour of love. With mathematical precision, he added more shelves and put in supporting boards so that they could store their exquisite blue-and-white porcelain in it. Some of the stone jugs on top of the cupboard belonged to Hein's dad.

▶ METALLIC

The yellow flowers accentuate the glow of the red copper and the dull lustre of the pewter plates. Metallic shades are very trendy in décor right now.

▼ ABUNDANCE

Below right There is a large citrus farm on the island, a spectacular feast for the eyes when the oranges start ripening.

▼ CHERRY HARVEST

Below left Cherries from their own garden. ■

