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CELEBRATING THE BEST OF AUSTRALIAN STYLE



TREE CHANGE

Swapping a sophisticated city apartment for a luxurious bush retreat has given these owners a new lease of life.

PHOTOGRAPHS SIMON KENNY WORDS JOSEPHINE BROUARD

THIS PAGE The owners travelled to South Africa to source much of the furniture to give Sangoma the feeling of a lodge in a game reserve. Leather sofa, outdoor 'Croissant' sofa designed by Kenneth Cobonpue, and cane tub chairs are all from Weylandts in South Africa. Rug and impala cushions from Living Leather in South Africa. Chinese coffee table is one of a pair from Orient House. Grandfather chair from Onsite Gallery in Cape Town. OPPOSITE PAGE Hurricane lamps from Weylandts line up beside the pool.





For former art consultant Michael Podles it's been a 360-degree change of lifestyle. Where once he crisscrossed the globe assessing public spaces for proposed sculptures or artworks, he now focuses on building rock gardens, repairing crumbling walls, conceiving and creating a shady grove or sculptural oasis, and monitoring the progress of his worm farm and herb garden. And he rarely strays from his property, except to source provisions or machine parts. His partner, Zenga Butler, who previously would jet off overseas regularly to shoot fashion catalogues with top photographers, models and stylists, is typically found in overalls and boots, tending to myriad maintenance tasks that arise on a 10-hectare country property. Most often, however, the make-up-artist-turned-chef will be found in the kitchen, listening to opera as he cooks up new recipes to please the palates of visitors who descend on their home at the weekend.

The pair once lived in a glamorous Potts Point penthouse with spectacular views of Sydney Harbour; their New Year's Eve rooftop parties were legendary, fireworks filling the sky above the generous outdoor deck with its panoramic vistas of water. Now their home is a bush property at Bowen Mountain, 70 minutes' drive northwest of Sydney's CBD, and the vista is an equally breathtaking panorama of lush greenery.

It's so near to the city, yet so far. And both Michael and Zenga have embraced country life as wholeheartedly as they once did a city lifestyle. Most of their friends visit during the week because on weekends the pair open their doors to paying guests. Jaded city slickers from all over the world descend on Sangoma – the name is African for 'witchdoctor' – to rest briefly in one of the private chalets on the property.

"Sangoma is a place to let go of everything that exhausts you," says Michael. "When people come here, they don't go anywhere. They just let their tired selves rest in the beauty of nature. For us it's a privilege to share this 'surrender' with our guests."

For Michael, the destination that is Sangoma took a long time to reach. "It started with something of an epiphany in early 2003 when I took a call from a client who offered me a contract to procure all the art for a large hotel in Dubai. Instead of being excited, I just thought, 'Here we go again', and it was in that instant that I realised that my life had to change."

THIS PAGE Copper tube and LED light fitting from Filament Lighting hangs in the dining area. Table and bleached horns in glass vases from Orient House. Antique chair in background is one of a pair found at a vintage store in Sydney and recovered. OPPOSITE PAGE, TOP The wall sconces are salad bowls from Ikea sprayed black and turned into lights by Filament Lighting. Round Burmese tiffin bowl from Orient House. BOTTOM In the bar area is a custom-made table in timber and stainless steel. Nguni cowskin ottomans from Living Leather. Antique chandelier was bought in India.



THIS PAGE, TOP View from the house and verandah is across spectacular expanses of bushland. Sunlounges from Weylandts. BELOW Bathrooms are tiled in grey travertine from Stone BC Tiles AD. OPPOSITE PAGE Suede bed in guest chalet is from Weylandts. Silver bedside drum table from Orient House. George Nelson 'Bubble' pendant lights from Filament Lighting. Bed linen from The White Linen Company. Leather tiles on walls, Ngumi cowskin rugs and Springbok and Impala cushions from Living Leather.



Michael had been in the art consulting business for 25 years and had just turned 50. Zenga, equally successful, was also approaching his half-century. "Michael and I decided we wanted to live in the country for good, and share with people something beautiful that we created," he says.

In November 2004 the pair bought an uncleared bushland property in the foothills of the Blue Mountains. They sold up their respective businesses and property in the city and moved into a caravan on-site in June 2006, sinking a bore almost immediately to access water. Sixteen long months later, construction on their bushland retreat began. "It has been far more difficult to bring about this tree change than we ever imagined," says Zenga. "It's been enormously stressful, and more expensive than we anticipated."

Part of the reason for the stress, the pair concedes, is their inability to stint when it comes to creating what they consider the ideal retreat. Firstly, they insisted on 100 per cent sustainability: rainwater is collected from the pavilions' 950 square metres of roof, and a bore provides additional water year round. Waste water is recycled via an award-winning biolytic system to irrigate the expansive bush gardens, and solar panels provide Sangoma with heat and power. All the suites have thermal pipes embedded in the concrete floors for heating during the region's crisp, cold winters. For those who like a fire, there is the added comfort of a slow-burning wood stove in each suite. In summer, a thermal cooling system keeps the suites at a perfect temperature, while gum trees around the chalets provide additional shade and coolness.

The hosts and their guests relish the luxury. Sangoma's eclectic decor is African-inspired, but there are no rhino tusks or elephant paws. Artworks by Brett Whiteley and David Hockney share the space with distressed leather sofas, giant totem figures from Papua New Guinea, porcupine quill mirrors, rough hewn wooden tables piled with books, all illuminated by a chandelier of slim copper piping and old-fashioned reading lamps.

Outdoors, soft LED lighting and the scent of magnolias signpost the paths to the guest quarters – three individual suites accommodate just six guests. "The focus of each suite is the bath," says Michael. "The emphasis is on privacy and intimacy; the only intrusions are the trees, the birdsong, the dappled light."

Certainly, Michael and Zenga feel reborn in their new country life. Says Michael, "Our wish is that everyone who visits Sangoma takes away a little of the magic." 15

For more go to sangomaretreat.com.au.

“THE EMPHASIS IS ON PRIVACY AND INTIMACY; THE ONLY INTRUSIONS ARE THE TREES, THE BIRDSONG, THE DAPPLED LIGHT.”

SPEED READ

A Sydney couple decided to relocate to the country and build a luxury retreat that would be open to paying guests on the weekend. + Set in 10 hectares, the property includes three separate guest chalets and utilises sustainable practices. + Interiors are African inspired with a sophisticated mix of leather and timber pieces, tribal figures, collectable art and designer lighting. + The indulgent bathrooms are a highlight and offer spectacular bush views.