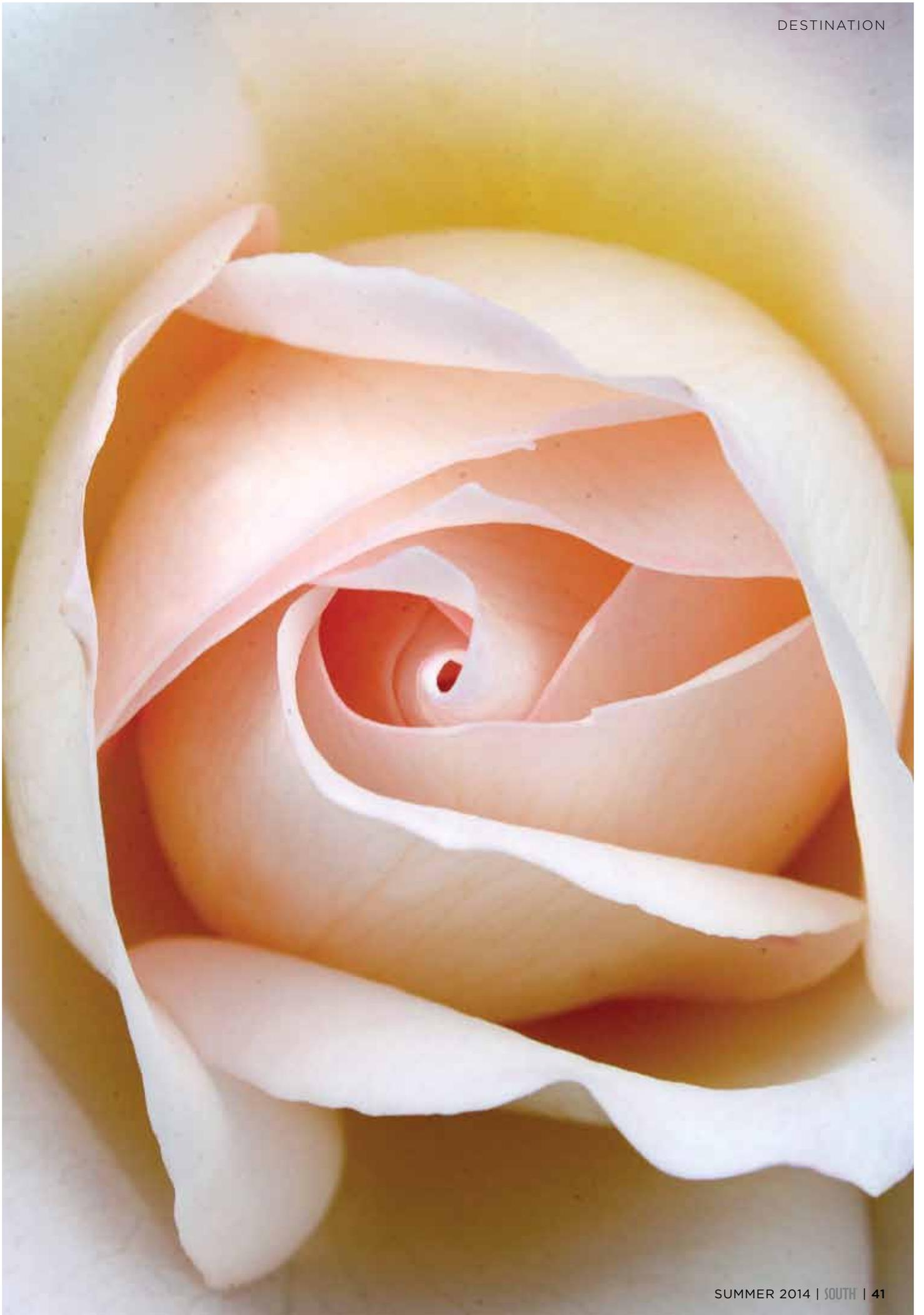


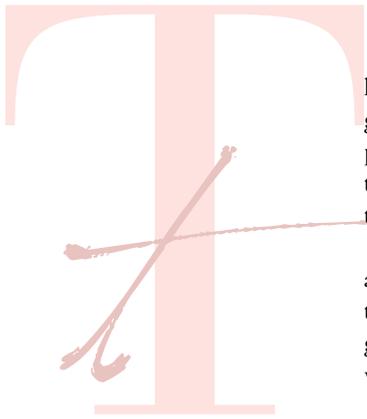


STOP AND SMELL THE ROSES...

In a secret valley between Plettenberg Bay and Knysna
hides a magic carpet of roses – one with its roots
in ancient history but with a distinct African and
uniquely South African twist.

WORDS **HEIDI SONNEKUS** PHOTOGRAPHS **LISA GREYLING**





There are 6 000 rose bushes in Rae Gilbert’s gardens at Bosky Dell. It was an empty nest project – done on her own terms, in her own time and for her own family – never intended to be open to the public.

However, Rae says: “Some time forever ago, a friend of a friend visited my neighbour up the hill and on a walk around their premises, glimpsed a corner of my garden below. She wondered what I was doing, building Versailles?”

Recognising exceptional gardening on sight, the curious visitor – who just happened to be Sheenagh Harris, president of the World Federation of Rose Societies – asked her hostess to phone Rae and arrange a visit.

But for this bit of synchronicity, Rae’s garden may never have been opened to the public nor would it have morphed into a magnificent venue for musical and artistic events. Today her Pavilion and Lovers’ Walk draw brides and grooms from across the globe.

“At the time my effort was still very new in terms of gardens,” Rae recalls. Yet word spread via Sheenagh and her rose-connections through the South African gardening fraternity and Rae started receiving groups of rosearians and garden lovers by appointment. Now it has become a much-loved part of her life and a full-time business employing eight locals.

A RICH HISTORY

Bosky Dell has a marvellous history. Drastically abridged, it goes like this: The central part of

Rae’s beautiful house next to the Bos River used to be the hunting lodge of an early Plett harbour master, circa 1840. Afterwards it was farmed – a few sheep, cows, vegetables and probably sweet potatoes, the latter being the go-to crop and staple at the time.

Later the slopes were cleared and pines planted on the steep, cool, acidic south-facing slopes. “Since pine and intensive chemical farming does not support local wild- or birdlife at all, the place was sadly quiet when we moved here from Johannesburg in 1997. And of course pine are very thirsty and the harvesting hard on the environment.”

Rae and her husband Greg chose to semigrate to this area “for the same reason everybody else does: to be able to live in a saner way”. Greg is still involved in the development of medicinal drugs, and the rose garden is but one of many things the dynamic couple is involved in.

They got rid of pine, blackwood, wattle, blue gum and rooikrans. Fynbos was encouraged to do its natural thing outside the electric fences, which keep (most) of the wildlife off the plot and out of the rose gardens. “As the pine and aliens went, in came mongoose, grysbok, caracal, bushbuck, snakes and – listen to that! – birdlife and song.”

Rae describes her magical rose carpet as a “formal garden with indigenous elements”, a bit “fruit-salady”. It has some very formal lines inspired by The Château de Villandry in France and, locally, the Cape Dutch Babylonstoren in the Drakenstein Valley, circa 1690.

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– *RAE GILBERT*

She knew she wanted to offset the formal European designs with something bright and ethnic. In the end, a little ethnic rug beneath her feet started her muses dancing. The design with triangles became the cornerstone of her creation, albeit not visible at regular eyeball-level. It is a secret part of the design she delights in, one that “only birds and pilots – and the neighbours on the hill” – get to see.

She smiles at how often planes on their way to and from the Plett airport do an impromptu 360-degree turn and second pass-over to ensure the pilot’s eyes did not deceive him/her (birds are less fussed and don’t do a double take).

However, the beautiful garden she now enjoys did not come easy. Rae had to flatten a little knoll, create a sub-surface French drain to deal with topsoil as fertile as the moon, depleted by years of bad chemical farming practices. Rae desalinated, trucked in hundreds of cubic meters of topsoil, improvised, adapted and learned – and still her first batch of 600 roses drowned while she was on holiday.

She originally chose roses named after South Africans, like the gorgeous Gwen Fagan, named for the doyenne of heritage roses in South Africa and author of *Roses of the Cape of Good Hope*. But Rae has since ventured into the fields of heritage and heirlooms. She delights in the idea that forebears of some of her blooms originally flowered in ancient Egypt, Greece and Rome.

A personal favourite is the *Russelliana* or Spanish Cottage Rose, possibly introduced to South Africa by the Portuguese trade ships centuries ago, which she found growing along the bank of the Bos River.

Rae loves the sense of history that roses bring. “Despite their ‘promiscuity’, there is a genetic lineage that can be traced and that remained pure despite hybridisation and interbreeds.”

She runs the garden biologically – pathogenic bugs and fungi are kept in check with friendly bacteria, insecticides are out. Rae loves sharing her roses and has “lent” her garden to artists for exhibitions, floral- and social clubs for inspiration, the Plett Animal Welfare society for fundraising, an athletics club for a trail run and eventually to the public for visits.

She invites guests to “treat the rose garden as you would a park in Europe: bring along a book, blanket and picnic, and spend the morning or an entire day. Take your time, enjoy a cup of tea and feed your soul: stop and smell the roses!” ■

VISIT BOSKY DELL

ENTRY Free

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ADDRESS HH34, N2, Plettenberg Bay. Turn off the N2 opposite The Heath.

TIMES November 1 - April 30; Wednesday to Friday 10am - 2pm; Saturdays 10am - 1pm. Closed on Sundays. Guided/special interest tours available by appointment.

Please pay for your self-service tea/coffee and slice of home baked cake (R30 per person) at the goodwill box in the Pavilion. Keep your eye on small children at all times - there are unprotected water features. No pets, smoking or music.

BELOW LEFT
Rae Gilbert

