

The revenge of the Huguenots

Capetonian Lanie van Reenen and a team of partners, experts and helpers have spent the past two years transforming a run-down French chateau into a luxury boutique hotel. Who better than author **MARITA VAN DER VYVER** to record this stirring tale exclusively for **VISI**?



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ADDRESS BOOK ON PAGE 158





● Is this the revenge of the Huguenots? These days, so many Afrikaans surnames pop up in the depths of the French countryside that you begin to wonder...

More than 300 years after the Huguenots were driven out of France, numbers of their descendants are returning from the southern tip of Africa. With the kind of daring you find only in those with pioneer blood in their veins, they are buying land, restoring old buildings, establishing guest houses, offering cooking classes and art lessons. They've tackled all this with enough flair to impress even their most stylish French neighbours – plus, most important of all, with that renowned *Boer-maak-'n-plan* ingenuity.

Lanie van Reenen is the newest addition to the list of brave *boeremeisies* who have ventured into *la France profonde*. Shortly after she sold her noted Cape Town guesthouse, Welgelegen, Lanie lost her heart to a neglected nineteenth-century chateau in Aubusson. Three years later, with the help of Cape architect Wynand Wilsenach and a team of enthusiastic South African partners, the old building has now been transformed into a luxury boutique hotel.

This transformation was no fairy tale wave of a magic wand, however, but rather more than two years of blood and sweat, of begging money from French bank managers and negotiating the highways and byways of French bureaucracy, all the while desperately trying to gain some mastery of the language. Her "secret weapon" was Hardy Olivier, another South African who had been living in the region for a number of years and spoke excellent French. He was involved from the beginning as project manager, general advisor, interpreter and go-between. About a year ago Lanie was at last able to take up residence in her castle, in one of two cosy little apart-

ments designed by Wynand in the attic. She was thus also able to keep an eye on the project.

Château Sallandrouze is the former home of the Sallandrouze family, who owed their prosperity to the centuries-old weaving tradition for which Aubusson is still renowned. In an old weaver's house converted into a museum, the visitor is able to learn how the industry was established here in the fifteenth century by Flemish immigrants. Two hundred years later, when the Edict of Nantes was revoked, their Protestant descendants were forced to flee to other countries. It's both ironic and appropriate that a group of Afrikaners should land up in this very spot to take over one of the palaces of the glory days – and to promote the local economy in a new way. The return of the Protestants, indeed.

"How can you not fall in love with a place that feels like a game of Cluedo – with a billiard room and a conservatory, a library and a secret stair to the kitchen?" Thus Wynand explained his enthusiastic involvement.

His biggest challenge was to retain the original feeling of a stately *belle époque* house, while providing hotel guests with all mod cons. "The whole house contained only three bathrooms and toilets were equally few and far between. Remember, there was a time when the French had to pay a 'luxury tax' for each toilet!" Now every one of the ten bedrooms has an impressive bathroom with a gleaming French limestone floor – echoing the solid limestone walls of the entrance hall – a freestanding bath and exquisite taps from Hansgrohe's traditional range.

A few months before the official opening, Lanie, decor book under her arm, takes me on a tour of her hotel-to-be. "Look," she says, pointing out fabric samples and photographs which she has pasted into the book, "This chair frame

will be covered with this fabric to stand there, near that window, which is going to have this curtain fabric. Do you see?" I struggle to see anything in the clouds of dust which hang like morning mist around us while plasterers, electricians and plumbers dart around and keep plying Lanie with questions, but I close my eyes and try to use my imagination.

The bedrooms on the first floor are furnished in "Classic French" style; those on the second floor are also French in style, but with an African twist. For example, an elegant Louis Quatorze chair, upholstered in a South African fabric splashed with enormous pink proteas. Almost every piece of furniture tells a similar story of transcontinental journeys and cultural cross-pollination.

Chairs, sofas and bedposts were made in North Africa, upholstered in South Africa with fabrics that were nearly all locally designed and transformed into period showpieces by Francois Irvine, "who can spin gold out of straw," according to Lanie. Then the load was shipped to the French countryside and stored for months in the sanctified atmosphere of an old church over the way from the Château Sallandrouze – until the happy day when every piece could finally be arranged in its planned place.

Lanie repeatedly stresses how much of a team effort it all was. She's full of praise for Wynand Wilsenach's keen designer's eye and for his wife Yvette's practical contribution. ("The only partner who speaks fluent French and knows how to read a spread-sheet.") Lanie's daughters, Nina and Michelle of Room 13 Design Studio, were responsible for the graphic design and the hotel website, and her three sisters helped remove layers of old wallpaper. Even Lanie's elderly mother lent a hand, threading beads to trim the bathroom curtains.

ABOVE, FROM LEFT The *gateaux aux frambois* from the local patisserie, La Noisetine, is almost too beautiful to eat; Detail on the cast-iron entrance gate; Lisa Kretschmer, the daughter of one of the partners, serves tea and cake in the conservatory with its 100-year-old vine. The settee and chairs are upholstered in Stonelight Lust and Obsession, both from Hertex. **OPPOSITE, FROM LEFT** Room 22, the smallest in the hotel, was enlarged by visually incorporating the bathroom. All the deep, white baths, basins and floor and wall tiles in the chateau come from South Africa, but the basin pedestals were carved in North Africa and finished off by Francois Irvine in Aubusson. The settee is upholstered in Phoenix Flower (colour: Linen) from The Silk & Cotton Co. and the walls painted in a 50/50 mixture of Earthcote's Stone and Floursack White; The chef, Cristoph Arthur, in one of the attic windows; This attic window is upholstered in Cleopatra (colour: Aqua) from The Silk & Cotton Co. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, LEFT (page 118)** The walls in room 12 ("the sexy Moulin Rouge room") are painted in Earthcote's Malva Pudding and the ceiling in Floursack White. The headboard is upholstered in Spiral (colour: Ruby Cinnamon) from The Silk & Cotton Co., the red scatter cushions in Hero (colour: Flame) from Chelsea Harbour and the ottomans in Yesterday (colour: Taupe) from Hertex. The backs of the red chairs are upholstered in striped Bugatti and the insides (visible right, below) in Moretti (colour: Claret), both from Stuart Graham. The faux-fur throws are made from Hertex's Renaissance Bear. **PREVIOUS SPREAD, RIGHT (page 119)** One of the bedroom balconies is home to a chair with the back upholstered in Bugatti from Stuart Graham. **FIRST SPREAD, LEFT (page 116)** Lanie van Reenen, the woman behind the project, enjoys exploring the village on two wheels. **FIRST SPREAD, RIGHT (page 117)** The entrance gate is diagonally opposite a stone chapel.







LEFT Old share certificates with signatures of Sallandrouze family members were discovered on the premises and used by Dianne Christian of African Sketchbook in the design for the fabric made for the hotel (the settee and chair are upholstered in it). The green-gold wallpaper with damask design is made from embossed papier-mâché. It dates from 1888, the year in which the chateau was built, and inspired the colour palette of the ground-floor salons. **BELOW** The old-fashioned red and orange sofa, upholstered in Hero (colour: Sherry and Pumpkin) from Chelsea Harbour, contrasts with the green shades used in both salons. The green is a continuation of a colour theme discovered (and retained) on the chateau's cornices, and wooden doors and frames. The chairs on the left were upholstered in Edna Paisley (colour: Sage) from The Silk & Cotton Co., and the chairs on the right in Florentine (colour: Nougat) from Chelsea Harbour. The curtains are Burnt-Out Silk (colour: Mercury) from The Silk & Cotton Co. and the carpets from MP Rugs. **PREVIOUS SPREAD (pages 124-125)** Room 15, the romantic honeymoon suite, boasts hazy white muslin drapes and the dramatic brown and silver headboards with mirrors were upholstered in Versailles (colour: Steel Blue) from The Silk & Cotton Co., which was also used for the tub chairs on the left. The chaise longue and ottomans at the foot of the bed are upholstered in Cotton Velvet (colour: Chocolate) from The Silk & Cotton Co., the curtains are James Russell Agencies' Home Grown Aloe (colour: Mud Hut), and the lampshades are available at Decadence. The linen is from Exclusive Home Fashions and The Hall Collection. **FOURTH SPREAD (pages 122-123)** Earthcote mixed the outside colour – Sallandrouze Red – to match it as closely as possible to the original colour of the building. The hotel has ten rooms with en-suite bathrooms and two self-catering apartments.

➤ Numerous friends and their children also supplied temporary manual labour in exchange for bed and board (The fact that Lanie is a brilliant cook undoubtedly helped to attract volunteers.) There were also more “professional” visitors from South Africa, such as Simon Fraser, marketing manager of Earthcote, who advised on paint colours and techniques. Many others helped from a distance, including Marietjie Lochner, “my right hand with the decor”.

“Initially we thought that the hotel would be able to open last year,” says Lanie with an amused shrug. She has learnt that in the French countryside everything takes much longer than you think it will. “The project also simply got bigger and bigger.” The French authorities insisted, for example, that they install a lift and equip special bathrooms to provide access for handicapped guests. The inflexible fire regulations meant that the doors of certain rooms had to be moved to bring them within the required distance of an exit. Of course as the project grew, so did the budget, which meant that Lanie had to find more partners and more money and engage in yet more negotiations with French bureaucracy.

“There were winter nights when I sat alone in my tower room in the castle – with a leaking roof and central heating that was not yet working properly – wondering what on earth had possessed me to buy a damned castle on the spur of the moment,” she admits.

But she is clearly not the sort of woman to give up on a challenge. And Aubusson's motto is *inter spinas floret* for a very good reason. It means “to bloom among thorns” – and that is precisely what Lanie van Reenen has succeeded in doing with her boutique hotel.



How can you not fall in love with a place that feels like a game of Cluedo - with a billiard room and a conservatory, a library and a secret stair to the kitchen.



CONTACT DETAILS

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- Wynand Wilsenach Architects 021 424 3230, www.w2.co.za, architects@w2.co.za
- Furniture will also be available in South Africa as The Sallandrouze Range: www.the-sallandrouze-range.com, or phone Francois Irvine 082 415 0370, or Jana Quass 082 661 1412, for more information.

ACCOMMODATION RATES

- 190 euro to 325 euro per room per night (bed and breakfast).

ABOVE The emblem of the dragon on this stained-glass window is specific to Aubusson. African Sketchbook also incorporated it into the special Sallandrouze fabric.

LEFT The original gold-embossed wallpaper in the dining room was preserved and had a great influence on the colour and design of the new fabrics for the curtains – such as The Silk & Cotton Co.'s Burnt-Out Silk colour: Mercury). The table is covered with a 20th-century Dom Robert tapestry, courtesy of the Aubusson Museum of Tapestry. The hotel will hold revolving exhibitions of the tapestries for which Aubusson is famous.