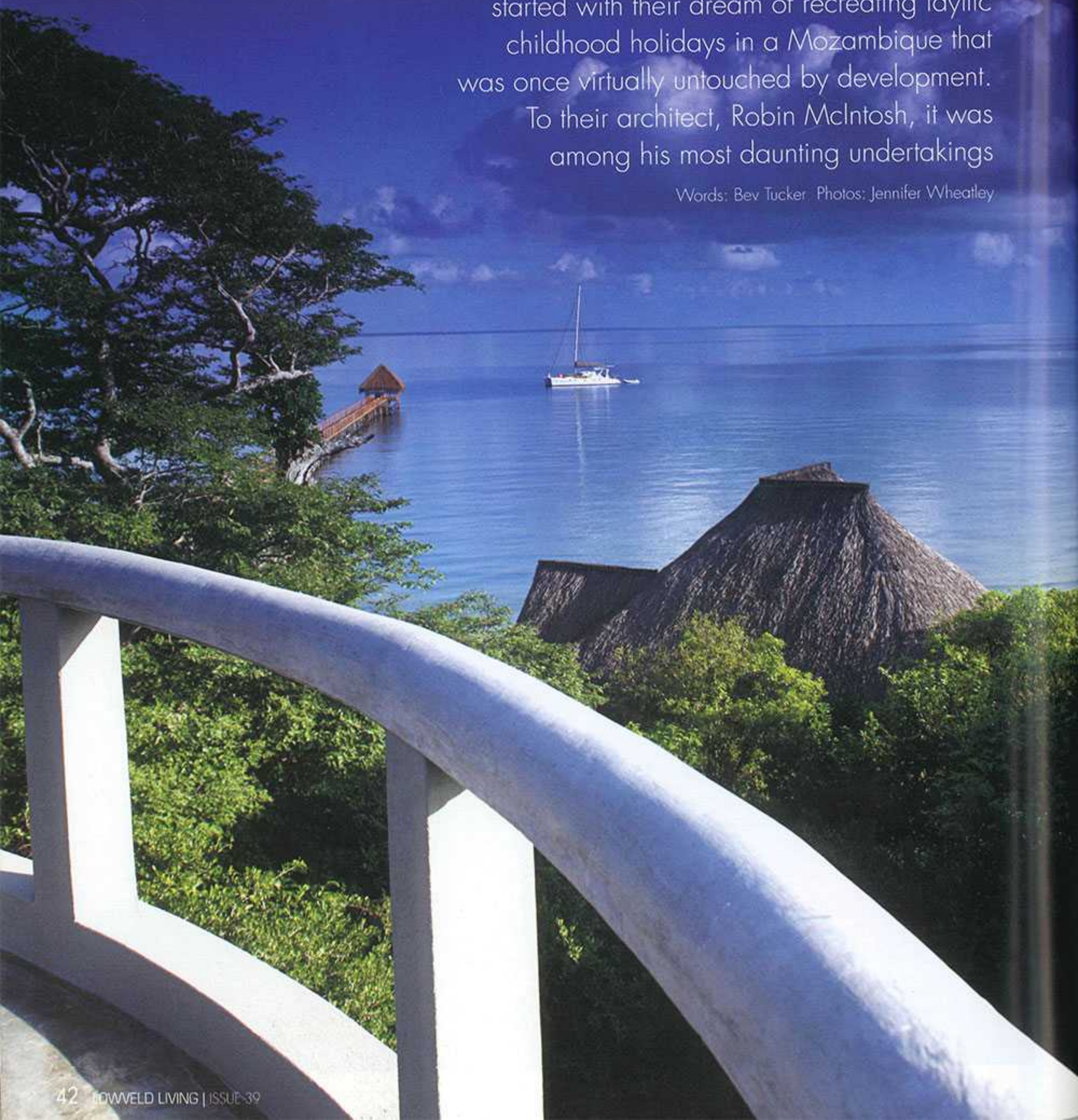


into the blue

To the owners, building Pontao Merapi started with their dream of recreating idyllic childhood holidays in a Mozambique that was once virtually untouched by development. To their architect, Robin McIntosh, it was among his most daunting undertakings

Words: Bev Tucker Photos: Jennifer Wheatley



Having grown up in the Lowveld, owner Zaskia Wilson had "the most incredible childhood memories" of holidays in nearby Mozambique. "It was something we wanted to give to our children and share with friends," she says. When land became available just off the coast of Vilanculos on the remote Bazaruto Archipelago, Zaskia and her husband Grenville engaged Robin McIntosh of Intersect Architects to build their paradise lodge.

"It was one of the most alluring sites I have worked on," says McIntosh, but the project was as challenging as it was beautiful. He was faced with the task of finding a design solution that would do justice to the incomparable setting and views while building on a severely sloping stand with enormous trees growing in awkward places on the site.

These three influences - the views, the slope and the trees - became the defining factors in the planning of the house. The final design says McIntosh, "Was the result of an exceptionally unique collaboration between the architect, an unusually involved client and later, the contractor. This project was an adventure rather than a conventional architectural appointment and based on the result I would not have had it any other way."

Everything about the build was logistically problematic. All the materials had to be sailed across the bay by dhow. Without the help of electricity the most basic tasks became onerous; even building stone had to be crushed by hand on site. There was no fresh water, cement was in short supply and glass was extremely expensive.

"It forced us to think differently," says Zaskia. "We researched East Coast African living to explore workable ideas." The site is in a cyclone belt, which posed yet more problems and danger and caused prolonged delays. "At one point we stalled building for nearly two years," says Zaskia. "Then we met a builder who had been living in Mozambique for some years and found Robin who was familiar with the region. Suddenly we had the opportunity to work with people who knew the area and shared our vision for what we wanted to create, backed up by a passion for what they do, and everything became possible; the building grew and evolved with a energy of its own."

This part of the Mozambique coast is fairly unspoiled. Against the backdrop of the Indian ocean there are frequent sightings of dolphins, Leatherback turtles, whales and a wide variety of bird life, making for the creation of blissful memories for anyone lucky enough to spend time here. "It's the closest thing we can still get to paradise," says Zaskia.

