



# Above mountains and grass plains

Above the mountains and grass plains of the eastern Free State, a luxury retreat seemingly 'floats' in the air. Boasting an alternative building system, the development has a surprisingly 'light' footprint on its sensitive location. *By Karen Eicker*

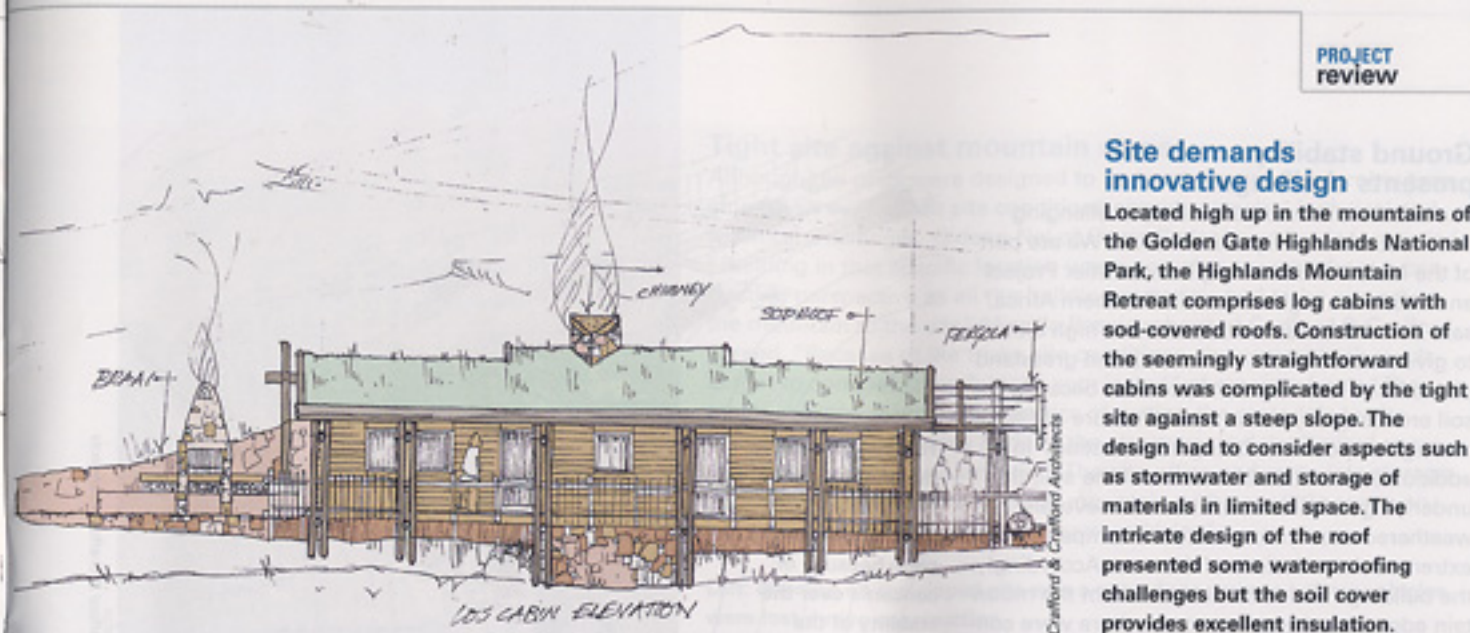
The eastern Free State highlands is a place of windswept beauty, virtually uninhabited. At an altitude of about 2 200 m, the mountains are exposed to severe temperature extremes with annual snowfalls and the plains are blanketed with unique grass species.

It is this remote location that was chosen for a new luxury camp in the Golden Gate Highlands National Park. Architectural firm Crafford & Crafford, a company with much experience in projects of this nature and in working with alternative building systems, created a cluster of rustic buildings that does not intrude on its special setting and is almost invisible from a distance.

Before the project was conceived, the park already provided standard to semi-luxury accommodation at the Glen Reenen Rest Camp and the Protea Hotel (on concession).

Sipho Zulu, hospitality services manager for the park and assistant project manager for the Highlands Mountain Retreat Camp, explained that the intention was to offer something luxurious in order to attract more visitors to the park. Funding was provided to Sanparks by the Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism (DEAT) through its Poverty Relief Programme, and implementation of the project was outsourced to Vuka Project Management.

Many consultations were held with the surrounding communities, the project team and various researchers because of the extremely sensitive ecology of the area, and an extensive environmental impact assessment was prepared. Stringent conditions were established to guide the design of the buildings as well as the construction process.



## Site demands innovative design

Located high up in the mountains of the Golden Gate Highlands National Park, the Highlands Mountain Retreat comprises log cabins with sod-covered roofs. Construction of the seemingly straightforward cabins was complicated by the tight site against a steep slope. The design had to consider aspects such as stormwater and storage of materials in limited space. The intricate design of the roof presented some waterproofing challenges but the soil cover provides excellent insulation.

