

The cottages contain a mix of handmade and handed-down treasures combined with shop finds. Kristina's eldest daughter, Nathalie, made the driftwood boat as a birthday gift, while the hanging fish is by Robe artist Lisa Enright. **FACING PAGE** Feathers and pampas grass gathered on a beach walk sit beside a ceramic parrot from Robe's Holiday.



MANY MANSIONS

WITH A LARGE BLENDED FAMILY, WHY STICK TO ONE HOUSE WHEN YOU CAN HAVE FOUR IN A ROW?

WORDS GRETEL SNEATH PHOTOGRAPHY MARK ROPER STYLING TESSA KAVANAGH

Christos Stoios did a double-take when his boss asked him to move to Robe to oversee new business interests. “I thought he said ‘Rome!’” says the property manager, laughing. South Australia’s Limestone Coast isn’t quite the Mediterranean — but five summers on, the salty breeze of the seaside town is under his skin.

“I lived on Melbourne’s Mornington Peninsula, so it’s a similar environment with the beaches, the surfing, the village-like atmosphere and the surrounding vineyards and farmland,” he explains. “You have your peak periods when all of the tourists come in, but the rest of the year it’s quiet and relaxed.”

Christos bought a row of cottages in the oldest part of town, planning to transform them into one large home, but this changed when he met Kristina Alexander four years ago. The couple have seven children between them aged from 14 to 27, and the existing building layout, with its individual entrances, bathrooms and kitchens, works well for a modern extended family.

“There’s certainly enough space and I guess it works because we can rotate around,” Kristina explains. “There are essentially four houses that we can choose from and

reconfigure depending on the situation; if all of the children are here, we can fit quite comfortably, but if they’re not, we can rent out one of the cottages for overnight accommodation.”

It’s largely smooth sailing despite the fact that three of the cottages have been named after local shipwrecks — the *Duilius*, which was wrecked on the rocks of Gulchen Bay in 1853, the *Phaeton*, which ran aground in 1857 on only her second voyage from Hong Kong, and the *Alma*, which came to grief in 1861. (Happily, the passengers on all three vessels are believed to have survived.)

The cottages have new kitchens and bathrooms, but maintain their simple, pared-back charm, with raw timber flooring and limewashed walls made from local stone. Concrete floors and an open-plan layout have given the main living area a more contemporary feel, with the blending of households extending to furniture and decorations.

Kristina manages Holiday, a local homewares store, and it’s clear that the Robe-designed range it sells, inspired by travel and adventure, matches her personal decorating approach. “My style has certainly evolved and is a lot more eclectic now,” she muses. “It’s funny how you change as >



CLOCKWISE, FROM LEFT Christos and Kristina met four years ago; the entrance to one of the cottages; the dining table and chairs are from Charlick’s Bazaar in Mount Gambier; kelp hauled up in a lobster pot by Kristina’s son Sam sits alongside a farm scene painted by Kristina’s mother. FACING PAGE A vintage doorbell by the door of the cottage that Christos has nominated his “bachelor pad”.





ABOUT THE HOME

- Dulux Antique White USA is used widely throughout the cottages — “It’s fail-safe and it goes with everything,” declares Christos. dulux.com.au
- When asked about favourite sources for furniture and homewares, the couple naturally nominated Robe’s own Holiday, where Kristina is the manager. (08) 8768 1800, holidaydesign.com.au
- Other frequent destinations are One Rundle Trading in Dulwich — (08) 8431 3033, onerundle.com.au; Charlick’s Bazaar in Mount Gambier — (08) 8723 9704, charlicks.com.au; and Country Road — 1800 801 911, countryroad.com.au

“MY STYLE HAS CERTAINLY EVOLVED AND IS A LOT MORE ECLECTIC NOW.”

you get older — once upon a time, I would cringe at the children’s colourful handmade Christmas tree ornaments clashing with my gorgeous, symmetrical two-tone vision. But now I think it’s beautiful being surrounded by their bits and pieces.”

Stacked pebbles, a bowl of shells and a boat made from driftwood are among reminders of times spent together by the sea. Christos is an avid beachcomber — “A lot of those things have got so much meaning and history,” he says — and he and Kristina confess to a friendly battle of wills when it comes to curating all the flotsam and jetsam that finds its way home.

“We’ve got so many old oars, and bits of rope, wire and driftwood that I keep shoving in the shed,” says Kristina with a smile. “But somehow they keep mysteriously reappearing in the house and garden.”

“I don’t want my house to look like a spec home,” Christos says. “I’d rather people see what we’ve done in our life — and this is a collection filled with all of our interests.”

The garden is a favourite space and they’re out there most days. “Because there’s no need to travel far for work, we can fit so many other things into our day,” Kristina says.

“Including gardening.” The rear has been configured with screens and gates so that it can accommodate both private and open spaces, depending on guests.

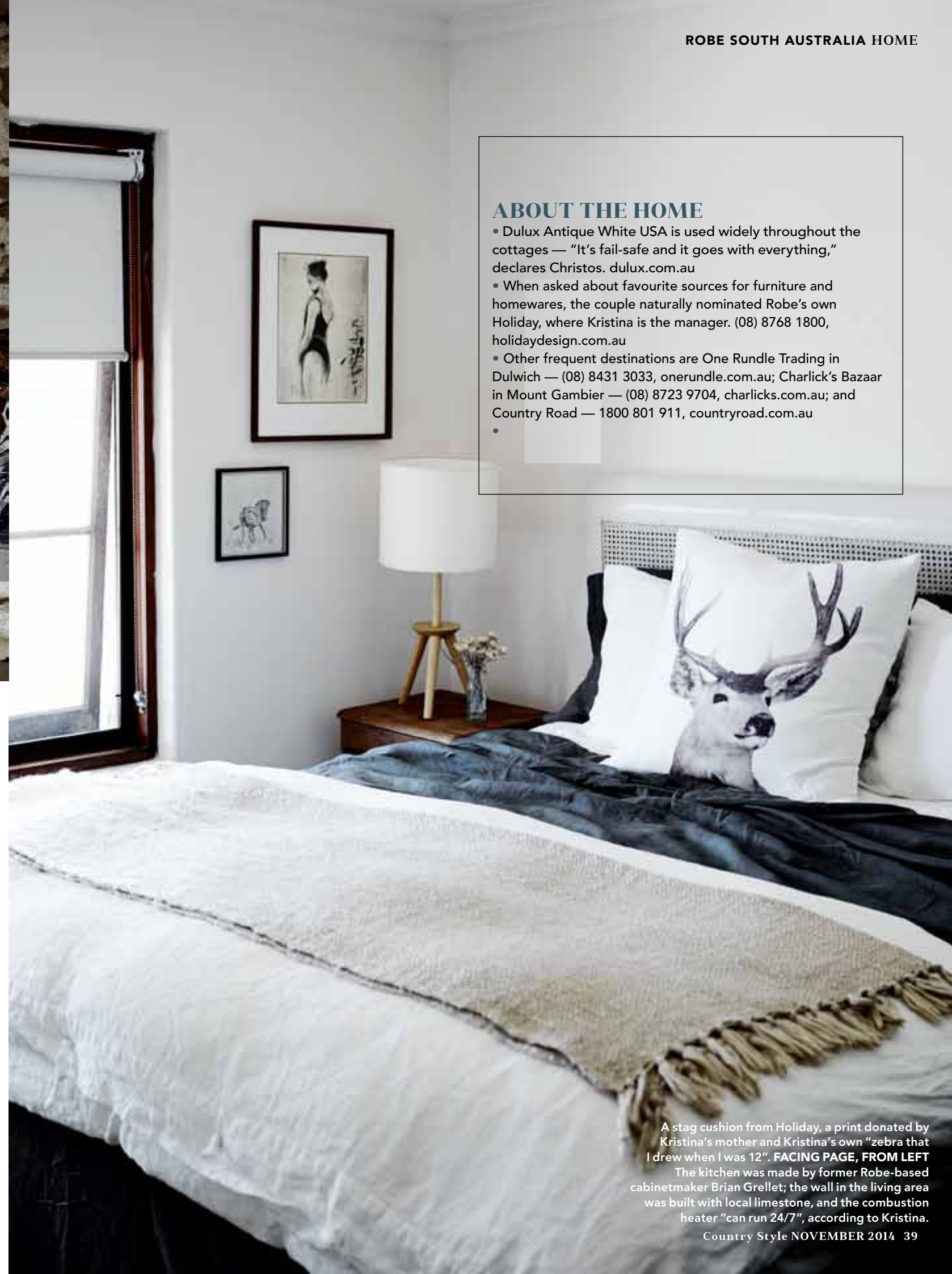
“The garden was non-existent when I arrived and it has been hard going because of the conditions,” Christos says. “It can get quite windy and cold, and there’s only a shallow layer of soil over sand, so it’s been a process of elimination — trying to work out what grows well and what’s never going to make it.”

So far, the succulents and pencil pines are winning while the couple waits to see what the new season brings — in particular, whether the liquidambar survives the onslaught of winter storms.

“I feel like I’ve lived in so many different places, and have always said that I wanted to plant a tree and actually see it grow” Kristina says. “So now that I’m finally settled, it’s fingers crossed.”

Failing that, Christos feels they should try their luck with more olive trees — surely Robe couldn’t be that much different to Rome? *

The Duilius cottage, in the centre of Robe, is available for rent. Telephone (08) 8768 2341 or visit happyshak.com.au



A stag cushion from Holiday, a print donated by Kristina’s mother and Kristina’s own “zebra that I drew when I was 12”. **FACING PAGE, FROM LEFT** The kitchen was made by former Robe-based cabinetmaker Brian Grellet; the wall in the living area was built with local limestone, and the combustion heater “can run 24/7”, according to Kristina.