

A place of grace

An owner built mud brick house in the NSW hinterland is for sale.

BY ADAM GUTHRIE
PHOTOS BY NICK EPOFF

In the early 1980s, Jim and Christine Da Silva were living in Nowra on the south coast of New South Wales, but dreamed of moving to the scenic hinterland that was within easy access of the town where they both worked.

Inspiration

'One day, Jim went to buy something in town,' recalls Christine, 'and came home all enthused. He'd seen a mud brick house display in the window of a bank that stated it was "dirt cheap" ' to build in mud brick.' The dream of building their own home in the hinterland was born and the steep learning curve began for the couple, who had no previous building experience. 'We regularly bought *The Owner Builder* and devoured its pages, did a mud brick course and visited existing mud brick homes at Eltham and Briagolong,' says Jim.

In 1985, Jim and Christine purchased their dream property - nearly eight hectares of pristine rainforest at the top of Berry Mountain, facing the escarpments of Kangaroo Valley. 'We called the property Timnah - Hebrew for Place of Grace - and had a vision for a place of healing that afforded peace and privacy,' says Christine.

An area of the property had been cleared by the previous owners and the large stumps of the rainforest trees simply pushed into nearby gullies. Jim and Christine set about clearing the gullies then made their preparations for making mud bricks for their owner built home.

Making the mud bricks

'We wanted to have good quality bricks,' says Jim, 'so we had purpose-built steel moulds made and made each brick individually, with Christine praying a mantra over every one we completed. The bricks were all 120mm high with

our standard bricks being 300mm x 300mm, half ones 300mm x 150mm and corner ones 300mm x 450mm.'

Initially, the pair cut an old water tank in half and used it to soak the mud. 'We bought divers' shoes and it was worse than treading grapes!' recalls Christine. 'We laid the bricks on the ground to dry at first, but the worms used to come out of the ground and up through the bricks so we bought loads of old sheets from op shops and placed them on the ground under the bricks. Then the wombats would waddle over and sit on the fresh bricks so we had to pen the bricks with chicken wire to keep them out.'

Stopping shrinkage

The expansive clay on the land ensured that the first few mud bricks stabilised with straw shrunk from 300mm to 270mm when dry. 'It was also a hassle cutting up the straw,' says Christine, 'so Jim experimented with some brickies' sand (which has some kaolin clay in it) and it worked. The bricks only shrunk minimally and the sand lightened the colour of the bricks to an appealing light beige tone. We used the same mix when the time came to lay the bricks, but added a small amount of cement to the mortar to prevent any shrinking in the mortar joints.'

After much trial and error, in 1988 Jim and Christine sent sample bricks to the CSIRO for testing. The bricks passed with flying colours and at last construction could begin.

Post and beam

'We decided on post and beam construction and this worked out very well,' says Jim. 'We were blessed to be able to buy 20 strong ironbark (*Eucalyptus sp.*) and turpentine (*Syncarpia*

glomulifera) girders that had been part of a local railway bridge for just \$200 for the lot. At a sawmill, we would have had to pay this amount for a single girder. They were six metres long and 300mm x 300mm. I used a portable chainsaw mill to take 20mm off all the outside edges, then Christine coated them with wood preservative and stained them.

'A crane and operator spent a day and a half putting the girders up. We then acquired an old International AW6 tractor and an old pig feed mixer with mesh added to the top to make our bricks using excavated subsoil from our building site.'

Christine recalls that one day Jim was pushing a wheelbarrow full of dirt up a plank to load up the pig feed mixer and lost his balance. 'The wheelbarrow and dirt went one way and Jim the other,' she recalls with a chuckle.

Doing it themselves

Jim and Christine had minimal assistance during the build. 'Apart from the electrician, plumber and roofer, we did all the work ourselves working weekends and holidays,' says Jim, 'though Christine's builder stepfather assisted in putting the frame up and a friend used to help out with mixing the mud from time to time.'

The pair designed a home split into three levels. The first mud bricks were laid in 1990. 'We built the back section first,' recalls Jim, 'and got permission from the local council to move into that in 1993. This meant we had tools on site permanently and could always do some work on the house after arriving home from our jobs.'

In the meantime, a pair of swallows built a mud nest in a part of the house that didn't yet have any walls. 'Their muddie went up a lot faster than our house!' jokes Christine. 'They were



1. The house spreads over several levels.
2. Beautiful wooden stairs lead up to the middle and upper levels.
3. Large timbers feature throughout the house, including in these feature doors.



4



5



6



7



8



9



10



11



12



13



14

- 4. Main bedroom has garden views.
- 5. Plenty of space in the games room.
- 6. Kitchen exits directly to garden.
- 7. Early days - Christine laying mud bricks.
- 8. Beautiful timber offsets the mud bricks.
- 9. Imposing front door looks through to arched double doors to the lounge.
- 10. View from light-filled mezzanine.
- 11. Ladder to loft uses natural timber brace.
- 12. House sits in hectares of shrubbery.
- 13. Arched mud brick frame for doors.
- 14. Luxury spa in the ensuite.

very annoyed when they came back the following year and found that they couldn't get in because the wall had been completed while they were away.'

Satisfaction

The house was completed on Jim and Christine's 38th wedding anniversary on June 30, 2000, with a final count of 7,893 mud bricks. The finished home contains five bedrooms (one with a mezzanine loft), a large studio, separate library/study, large country kitchen, dining room, lounge, mezzanine, two and a half bathrooms, three toilets and a double garage. Heavy timber arched doors and four leadlight windows add to the charm and beauty of the home.

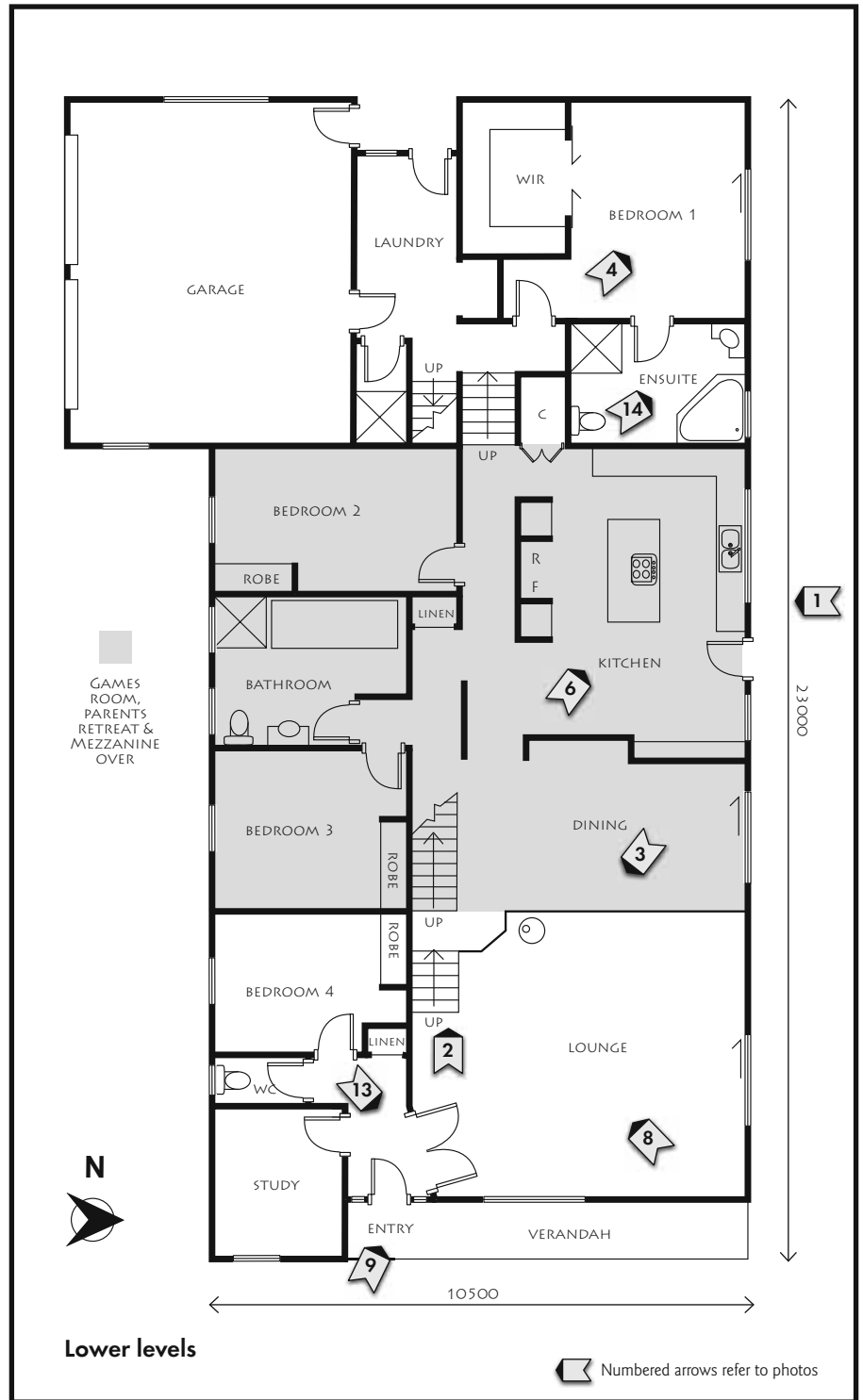
'It took 10 years to build our masterpiece, working on weekends and holidays,' says Jim, a Vietnam veteran and former aircraft engineer in the Royal Australian Navy, 'and we are extremely proud of our accomplishment. We have concrete slabs throughout laid with slate in all the service areas, a blackwood (*Acacia melanoxylon*) and granite kitchen, exposed beams in all rooms and ceilings lined with pine lining boards. The roof is *Colorbond* steel and we recently added a 3kW solar power system that feeds back to the electricity grid.

Extensive landscaping has settled the home into its splendid natural setting, with azaleas and rhododendrons producing a riot of colour in spring. 'The native wildlife at Timnah is amazing,' says Christine, 'with wombats, wallabies, echidnas, lyrebirds, king parrots and a host of other birdlife. Two tawny frogmouth owls come back to mate every year quite near the house and usually produce twins.'

'Tackling an owner build project is hard work and requires blood, sweat and tears, but the results are so satisfying,' says Christine, whose advice to novice owner builders is to make sure to take time out and keep a good balance. 'The night we moved in Jim and I were lying in bed looking at the walls and recalling stories about those last difficult to lay bricks.'

Time to move

Now Jim is 71 and Christine 68, the couple are planning to downsize in nearby Berry and spend time travelling together. 'We have absolutely loved living at Timnah,' say the pair, 'and friends and



others often comment on the peaceful, spiritual feeling of our home. We pray that new owners will appreciate the love and work that has gone into the house and that they will be greatly blessed by living at Timnah.' ■

'Timnah' is now for sale. Should you be interested, please contact Adam Guthrie 0416 091 641. www.berryproperty.com.au > Properties, Timnah



- **Adam Guthrie Lifestyle Property**

A lifestyle and environmentally conscious organization; passionate about the South Coast and sustainable living. 0416 091 641, www.berryproperty.com.au

- **Nick Epoff Photography**

0432 223 208, www.nickepoffphotography.com.au