



Nestled within the rugged lava landscape of lower Ocean View, the Elhard's Southwestern-style home sits above the entrance of an extensive lava tube system. (Far left): Rose and Ric, on their lanai.



HIDDEN TREASURES

Ka'u Desert home sits atop ancient caverns

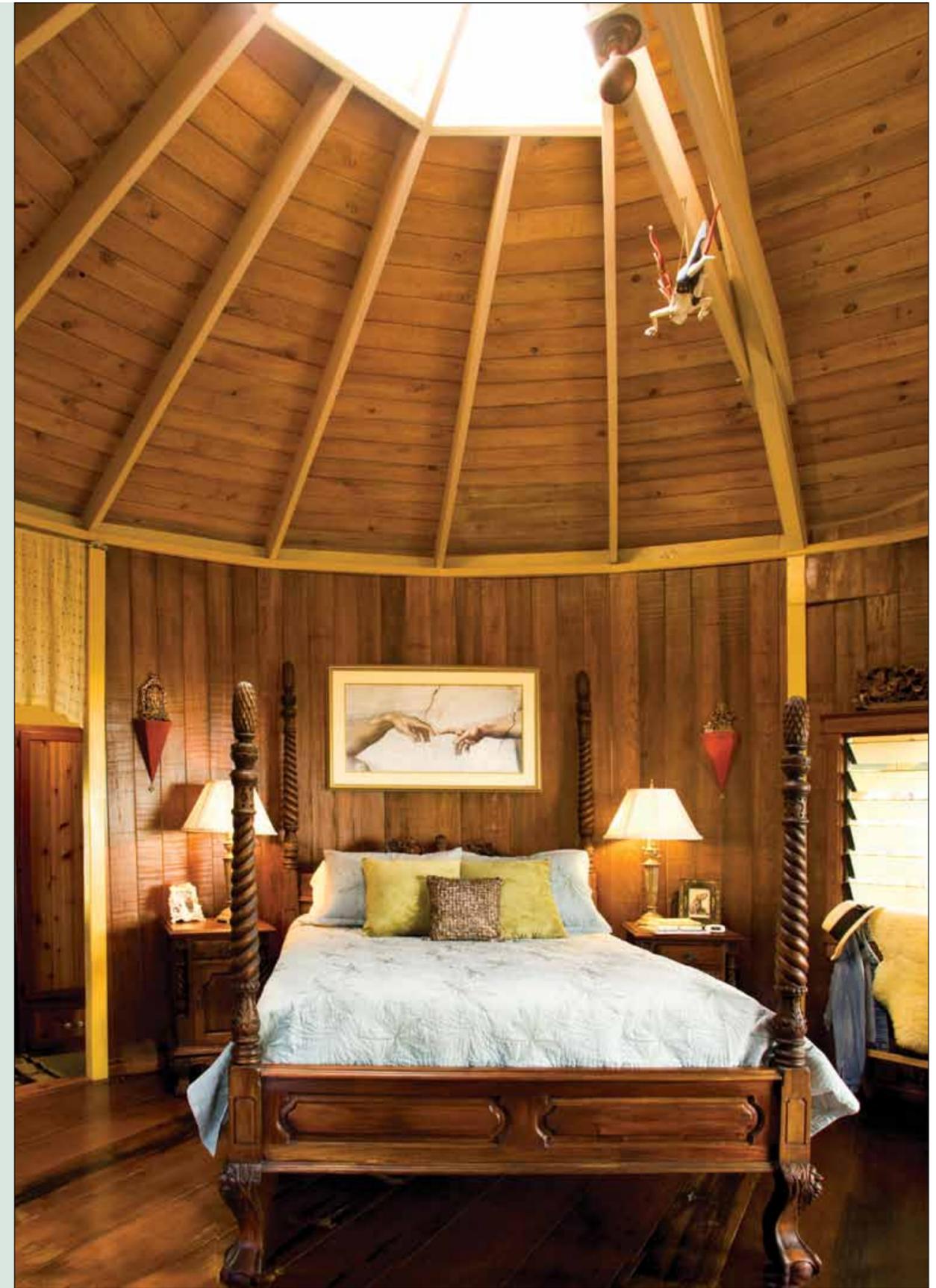
By Kristina Anderson
Photography by Giselle Thompson

Twenty-eight miles of professionally surveyed caves crisscross beneath the Ka'u Desert in Ocean View, where the Kula Kai View Estates home of Ric Elhard and Rose Herrera hugs the contours of the rugged a'ā lava dotted with occasional ohī'a trees or cactus.

Both originally from the Gold Country of Northern California, Ric and Rose bought the land not just for what was above ground, but for what was below — a substantial, 1,000-year-old lava tube system with 20-foot ceilings, meandering twists and turns, towering cathedral vaults, pools, stalactites, stalagmites, tree roots and other elements that comprise a vast underground environment like no other in Hawaii. ▶

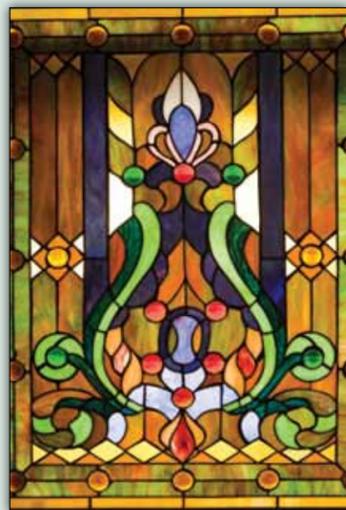
“Kula Kai Caverns and the Cave Conservancy of Hawaii focus on conservation and protection of these caves for educational and scientific purposes in perpetuity.”
 — Ric Elhard

The couple's bedroom occupies a massive, 1930's-era catchment tank obtained from the Gomes property in Hualalai. Ric engineered the room himself, maintaining the original redwood flooring and adding a circular, vaulted ceiling.





The guest bathroom includes a freestanding clawfoot tub, along with recycled double-hung windows and stained glass creations made by Ric.



“We love the Gold Country of California, and we brought a lot of it here with us.”
— Rose Herrera



(Above): The Elhard’s glass-enclosed sunroom unveils panoramic views of the lava desert and 30 miles of coastline. “Caldera” tile came from Tile Warehouse, while windows were salvaged from a Hualalai Resort remodel.

The Kula Kai Caverns, which runs almost directly under Rose and Ric’s home, is only a small part of the enormous Kipuka Kanohina Cave Preserve system, currently the world’s second-longest surveyed lava tube system.

“Originally, we had a commercial caving operation in mind when we were looking for property in Hawaii,” says Rose, a caver (not “spelunker,” a term used by less serious hobbyists) who worked as a nurse for 20 years, but is, at heart, an artist specializing in color and interior design.

Ric, her partner of 22 years, is a craftsman skilled in custom construction, carpentry, stained glass artistry and welding.

Together they built an intriguing desert house totally suited to the dramatic and remote landscape, utilizing a remarkable and impressive stash of recycled, reused or salvaged materials.

Most notably, the entire master bedroom is a rebuilt 1930s-era catchment tank from the Gomes Ranch on Hualalai. Complete with original flooring, the room is an amazing feat of precision carpentry.

“The floor is true 2’x12’ heart-grain redwood,” explains Ric. “I used the tank’s existing underpinnings and painstakingly rebuilt it plank by plank.”

The resulting masterpiece, a room in the round, reflects Ric and Rose’s love of reuse, along with scenes of their life that include memories of California as well as souvenirs from their travels. Decorated inside and out with original art, stained-glass windows, English antiques, and furniture from the Sierra Foothills, the curved room casts a soothing ambiance as sun filters through lace curtains. ►



Teak table and chairs are crafted from an antique ox cart in Thailand. The tabletop is one of the wheels from the ox cart. Brandy keeps a careful watch of the premises.



The Elhards host guided tours of the Kula Kai Caverns, which is located below their home and outfitted with lighted trails and viewing decks. “This property was an oasis for the early Hawaiians because they collected water in the caves,” Ric said.

Camping for four years in a M*A*S*H-style tent when embarking on their home-building project, Rose and Ric worked on the dwelling while exploring the extensive network of caves beneath their property. At first, they had no idea that the cave system would prove so vast and so important.

Hooking up with fellow Ka‘u caver Don Coons as well mainland caver John Fairchild and assorted professional cartographers, scientists, biologists, geologists, volcanologists and conservationists, they began the journey that would lead to not only creating prominence for the Kipuka Kanohina system, but protection as well — founding the non-profit, Cave Conservancy of Hawaii in 2002.

In the meantime, work on the house and three-acre property, which they purchased in 1989, continued. A self-described craftsman-builder, Ric worked without blueprints, building the kitchen almost entirely from found materials and dunnage (scrap lumber).

Sentimental pieces were added as well, such as the old-fashioned kitchen windows that came from Rose’s aunt’s barn in Albany, Oregon. Warm woods evoke an inviting Southwestern feeling to the room, where a hearty pot of lentil soup might be simmering on the stove on any given afternoon.

“Ric designed the home so that every window in the house presents a picture but still allows us a sense of tranquility and privacy,” Rose says.

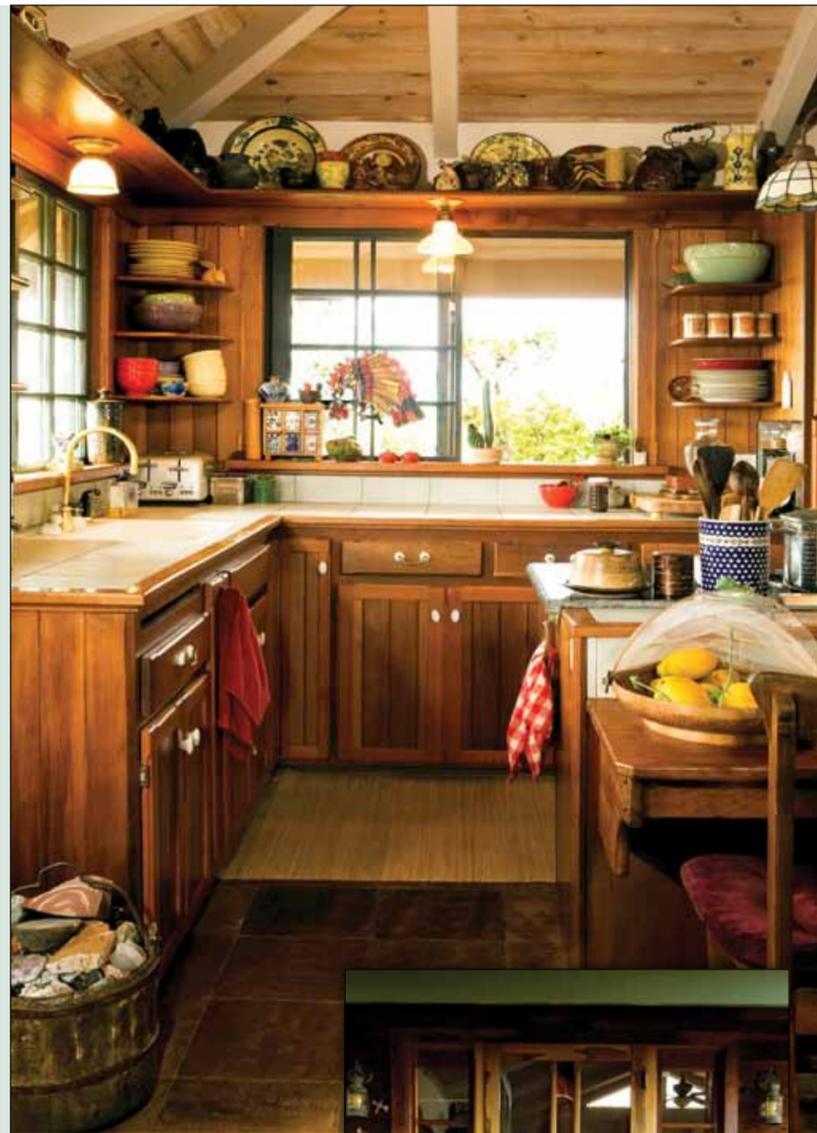
Rose’s contributions by way of interior design are the breathtaking collections of artwork, sculpture, crystals, antique opium bottles (sourced from an old Chinese workers’ railroad dump in Ka‘u), miniature portraits, quilts, beaded lamps, pillows of assorted textures and fabrics, Persian carpets, primitive paintings and Hawaiian collectibles.

It all gives the home an enchanted “New Mexico meets Hawaii” feeling.

As artists and craftspeople, Ric and Rose exhibit seemingly endless talents. Ric’s on-site studio abounds with stunning examples of his art, including tarot cards depicted in stained glass, a fierce scrap-metal tyrannosaurus sculpture and a bounty of rebuilt guitars.

Rain catchment is their only source of water in the Ka‘u desert. So fortunately the couple discovered that they could catch supplemental water themselves in the same way that the ancient Hawaiians did — with a 5,000-gallon natural reservoir pool at the cavern entrance. They’ve found much evidence that Hawaiians likely used these caves for exactly that purpose.

“With little or no surface water available, this cave was a place of survival,” explains Rose. “Torch sticks, burned kukui nuts, and remnants of grass fires can be found ▶



Redwood and cedar kitchen built of recycled materials.

“There were no blueprints for building the house. Seventy-five percent of everything is lumberyard scraps or recycled materials.”
— Ric Elhard



A warrior statue from China stands sentry at the front door. Copper lanterns were salvaged from an old restaurant in Kailua-Kona.



Beneath gnarled trellises made of ohia, the compound’s inner courtyard provides a cozy gathering place around the fire on cool winter nights.

hundreds of feet from the nearest entrance. However, we’ve found no evidence that these caves were used for Hawaiian burials.”

As cavers, Ric and Rose feel blessed to have been given the stewardship of the Kula Kai Caverns, which they have opened to the public for tours. Schoolchildren come from all sides of the island to see the wonders that unfold below. On the scientific end, every year, cavers journey from the mainland and around the world to help the couple map the cave system, many areas of which are yet uncharted.

“It’s such an enjoyable way to educate people about all aspects of conservation,” Rose says. “It’s an adventure and resource we love to share with the world.” **AH**

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