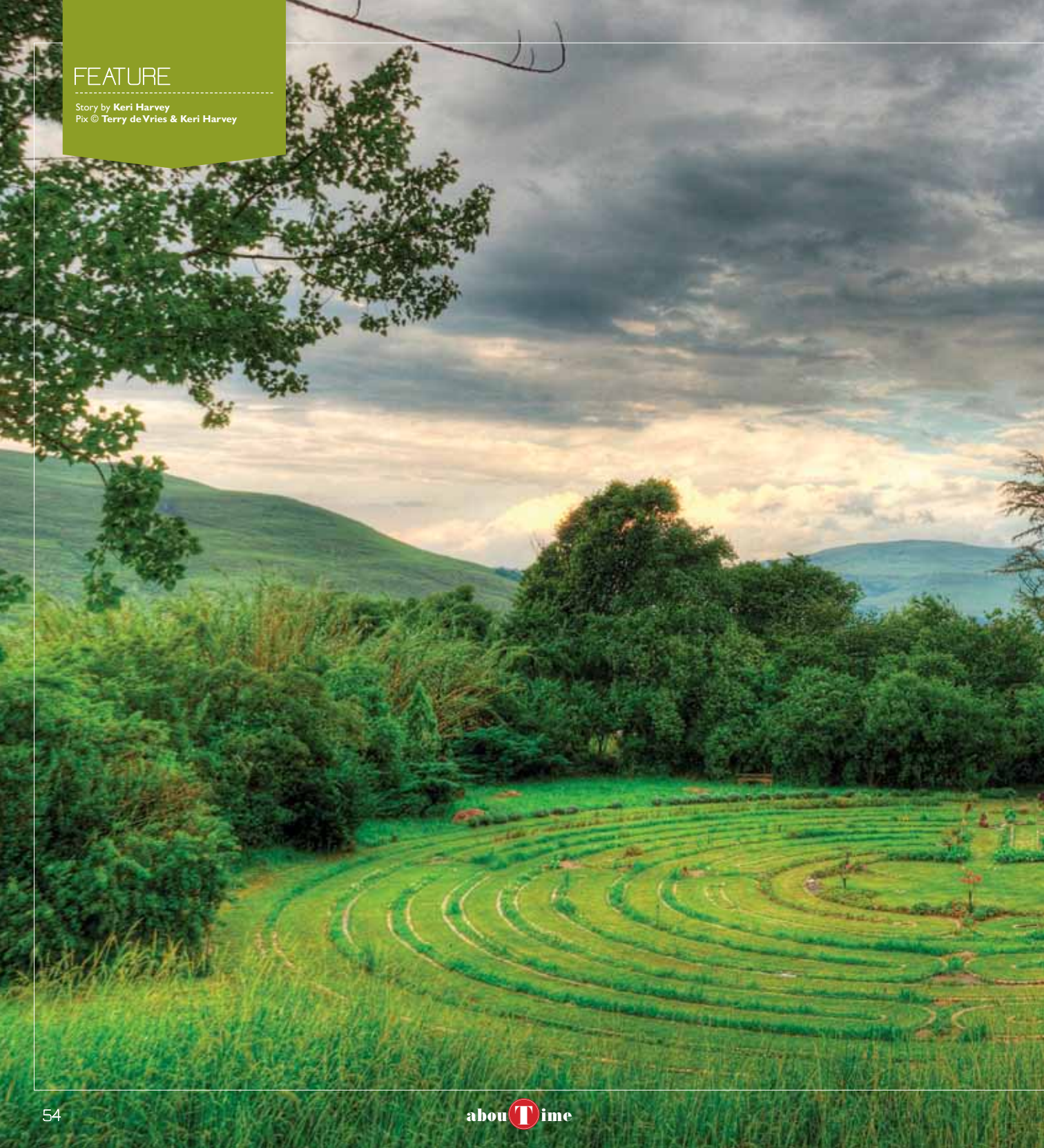


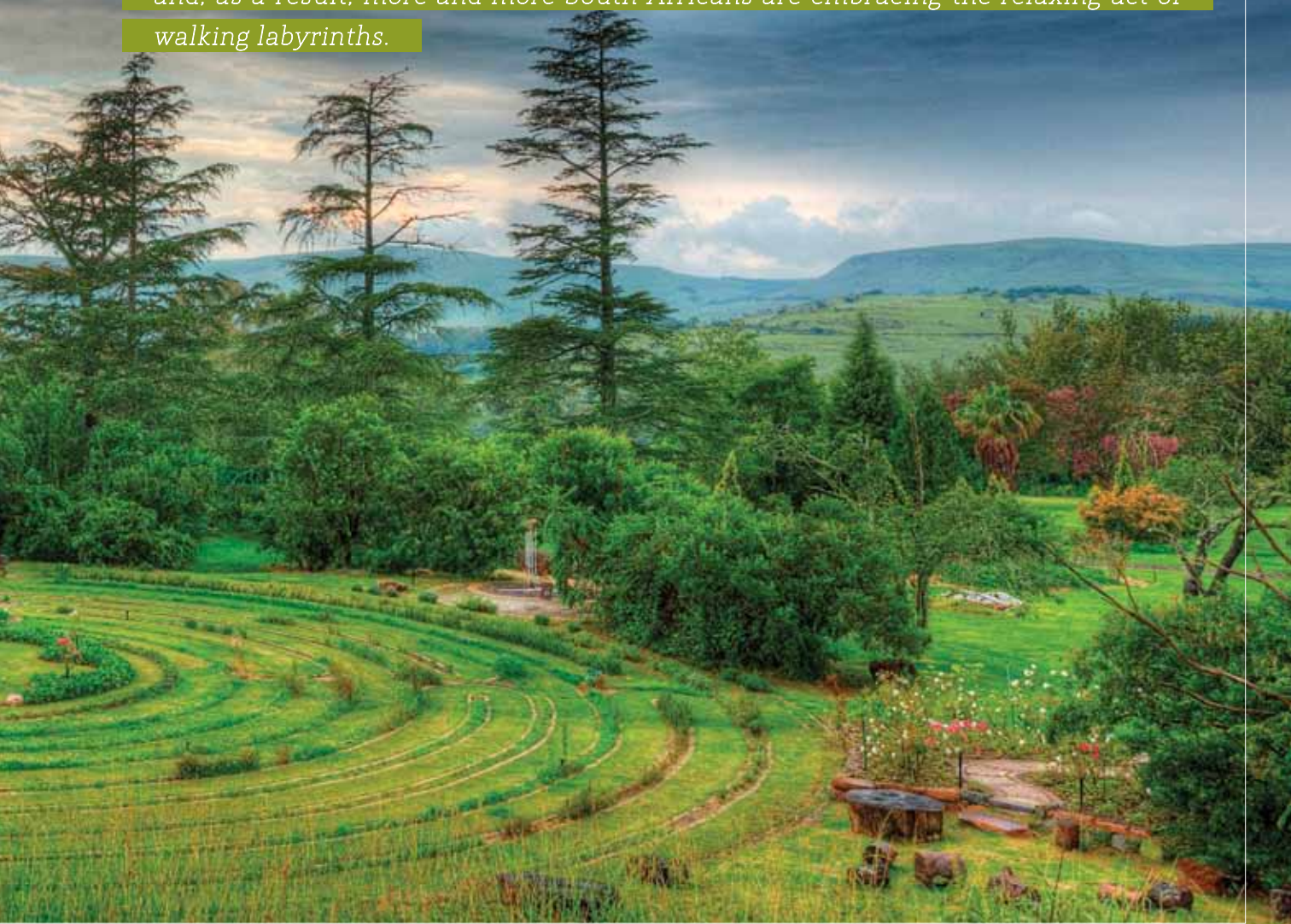
FEATURE

Story by Keri Harvey
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CIRCLES OF **Calm** Labyrinths

It is a curious concept that walking a series of circles creates calmness. Yet it does and, as a result, more and more South Africans are embracing the relaxing act of walking labyrinths.





From small city gardens to farms, labyrinths are being built all over the country and it is estimated that there are currently over 200 labyrinths in South Africa. While heading out with the family to walk a labyrinth may be a quirky outing, labyrinths have for millennia been used for relaxation and clearing the mind.

From Ancient Egypt and Norway to Italy, Spain and Morocco, every continent has labyrinths. They appear on ancient Greek coins and in Roman mosaics, with the earliest depiction of a labyrinth engraved into a now extinct mammoth tusk in Siberia and dated at over 7,000 years old. Yet South Africans have only recently twigged on to the benefits of walking labyrinths.

Terry de Vries has been building labyrinths and hosting labyrinth workshops for over ten years and says: “The great thing about labyrinths is that they bridge countries and cultures and religions. Actually, they have nothing to do with religion and pre-date our current world religions. You don’t need to believe in anything in particular to walk a labyrinth and feel the benefits.”

Labyrinths should not be confused with mazes, the latter being designed to lose yourself, the other to find yourself. While mazes are built with hedges and plenty of dead ends, labyrinths are laid out flat on the ground and as there is only one path to walk, it is impossible to get lost. “Labyrinths have one path into the middle and one path out, so your only decision is whether to walk the path or not,” says Terry. This also means that labyrinths allow you to disengage your left brain hemisphere – which has to be switched on, alert and analytical in a maze – and to engage your creative, intuitive, imaginative right brain hemisphere, because you do not need to think about where you are walking in a labyrinth.

Labyrinth design is not random either; all are based on either a classical or medieval pattern. “They are not just a pretty collection of circles,” adds Terry, “but are circles in a set pattern, so that when you walk them, they encourage calmness in you.” When you are calm, all of life seems easier and better, even work and sleep is improved.

South Africa has labyrinths built from an array of materials – even from cacti – though sticks and stones are the most common building materials. Completely unique is the Reconciliation Labyrinth at Slangkop lighthouse in Kommetjie in the Western Cape. It is designed for two walkers, who walk halfway on their own and then cross over and walk in the other’s footsteps.


In ancient times, people walked labyrinths to welcome the new seasons, or as a walking prayer meditation to ask for a rich harvest. Norwegian fishermen walked labyrinths to ask for a good catch and their safe return home from sea. Today people walk labyrinths to clear their minds, to find the answers to personal questions, to process grief, to heal trauma and depression, to work through divorce or addiction, to solve problems, set goals, gain insight or simply to calm down. Still others walk just for fun,



for exercise, or to spend time outdoors. The motivation does not really matter, neither does it matter if you believe in meditation or not, because the outcome is the same: calmness and clarity of mind.

Research on the effect of labyrinths on people has turned up some interesting results too, showing that they calm children with ADHD, even though children usually run labyrinths. Other research indicates that people receiving chemotherapy react better to their treatment when they walk labyrinths. Possibly, labyrinths are healing because your mind calms down, and your body simply gets a chance to be itself.

Anyone can build a labyrinth, using any material to demarcate the path. Simply use what you have where you are. Sticks, stones, shells, bricks, even shoes have been used to sketch out a labyrinth. What matters more is that you walk the paths of the labyrinth and feel the difference a little calmness makes.

For a comprehensive listing of labyrinths in South Africa visit www.rainbow-labyrinths.co.za. Terry de Vries builds labyrinths and facilitates labyrinth walks, workshops and retreats in the Western Cape. Contact her on +27 82 442 5623 or email terrydevries@mweb.co.za. 



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