

**SEEC**

*Pioneering*

**REPT**

*Hosts*

*of the*

**STAYS**

*New Chic*

ASSOULINE

MELINDA STEVENS

in collaboration with  
ISSY VON SIMSON and TABITHA JOYCE

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## Introduction

Earlier this year, I went to stay as part of a big house party with the owners of the Hall at Bolton Abbey in Yorkshire. On Saturday morning, I wandered its quiet corridors, a mouse on the march. Floors creaked, pigeons cooed like bubbling soup outside the window, quiet murmurings of pots on the boil coiled up from the kitchen. In the breakfast room, I poured coffee into a cup. I folded the back of a newspaper, snap. I looked at the huge oil paintings of pale-faced ancestors sitting moonishly alongside their eager hounds and imagined the hushed squeak of their barks and their tails' soft swish along the flagstones.

But mostly, it was silent. A special kind of silence that goes back in time and forward in time in a corridor of forever. The kind of silence that changes the position of things, that makes you realize it's the house that's living and you're no more than a cell within its bloodstream for this pocket-small moment in time.

The Hall belongs to the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire. It was built in 1678. And now it's open for revelers of all descriptions. For anyone who wants to suck up picnics on the moors, knee-deep in treacle tart and red wine, who hankers for walks, for landing a fat trout on the lawn, for pottering around the abbey, for pressing backs against the mossy walls of the kitchen garden and gorging on soft, sweet greengages.

The Hall is not alone in this endeavor. These usually private spots, these hidden homes, these mysterious castles, these outlandish *castelli* and *riads* and monasteries and châteaux, previously entirely inaccessible, have now flung open their doors. Partly motivated out of financial viability, it's also been made possible because society walls are being dismantled by a younger generation who have a new attitude, who are not scared of sharing, and who understand the power for all in being open-armed.

How one-dimensional these places have made run-of-the-mill hotels look! How wide-eyed and functional! Here is history, storytelling, fortunes won and lost, layers to experience. Here is something unique and of this place, and of this place alone! At one point in the hotel boom that began gathering real pace in the '90s, it looked like all we wanted to do was fly and flop. To have breakfast on the terrace with those little pots of honey and strawberry jam. To gorge on pillow menus and chocolate rooms and brunch on a tray that floated in the infinity pool attached to our overwater villa.

But it turned out we also wanted something else, and in the noughties, someone else made that possible. People were, strangely if you think about it, renting out rooms to complete strangers, from a tiny flat in Copenhagen to a farmhouse in Bulgaria. And suddenly, it was happening everywhere. And suddenly, everyone was doing it. Airbnb changed what we gave value to, and it changed how we behaved. We loved being in people's houses now, tucked up into their lives; we loved the immediacy of the experience, the privacy, the control, the person in the personality of the place.

Perhaps more importantly at the center of this cultural shift, this morphing shape of how we travel, has been the mighty retro-realization that we believe again in true hospitality. We have a desire to provide which goes far beyond the transactional. To take strangers in, to shelter them from the storm, to exchange stories of different lands, to break bread, to offer rest.

It is feasibly one of the simplest and most profound of human undertakings. And it is what the game-changing owners in this book do: open their doors to what are now the world's most remarkable places to stay.

Melinda Stanup



## The Manor House, Babylonstoren

Owned by Karen Roos and Koos Bekker

Simonsdium,  
South Africa



"The rain is always a welcome thing in South Africa," says Karen Roos. "When you hear the rain on the thatch, it's a beautiful sound. But also, the smell of the wet roof is incredible." The reeded thatch atop her H-shaped farmhouse is just one of the traditional methods that has been embraced. Another is the pearly-white lime wash, made out of crushed seashells. "We have to rewash the walls every year, but it's important that we respect the building that way." Karen and husband Koos Bekker have form reviving historic buildings, reimagining Hadspen House in Somerset, England, into the game-changing hotel and country estate the Newt. Here in the Franschhoek Valley, this completely unrestored Cape Dutch manor sits at the heart of Babylonstoren's vineyards. It is part of the action yet still private, tucked away. The house needed considerable attention. They managed to keep the original floors and the yellowwood ceilings. "There were a lot of funny little extensions that we just took off. I wanted to get back to its roots as a very simple homestead," Karen explains. "The main part of the house has three bedrooms—very big drawing rooms, but only three bedrooms. We lived in it for a couple of years, and while I was making it a home, I already had in mind that it could be for other people too." Inside there's little decoration; the look is completely stripped back. "It almost feels like it's still two hundred years ago. There's no real difference except for the bathrooms and kitchen. We inherited some of the beds and the enormous wardrobes that were made for the rooms." The library is where the history comes to life. "There's an eighteenth-century clock that was just left here. And the previous owner gave me a beautiful delft vase that came from the family. I really treasure it. We also have a collection of butterflies entrusted to me by a professor at the university when he turned eighty-five. It is like having a living museum." Lying in bed in the morning, you can see the big swoop of the Swartberg mountain range, sometimes with a dusting of snow on top. And there's often a chicken wobbling on the windowsill—this is a working farm, after all. In addition to the chickens clucking, there are turkeys and sheep. "There was also a donkey that we inherited who did not want to leave. Now we have his fifth-generation foal. Children love him."



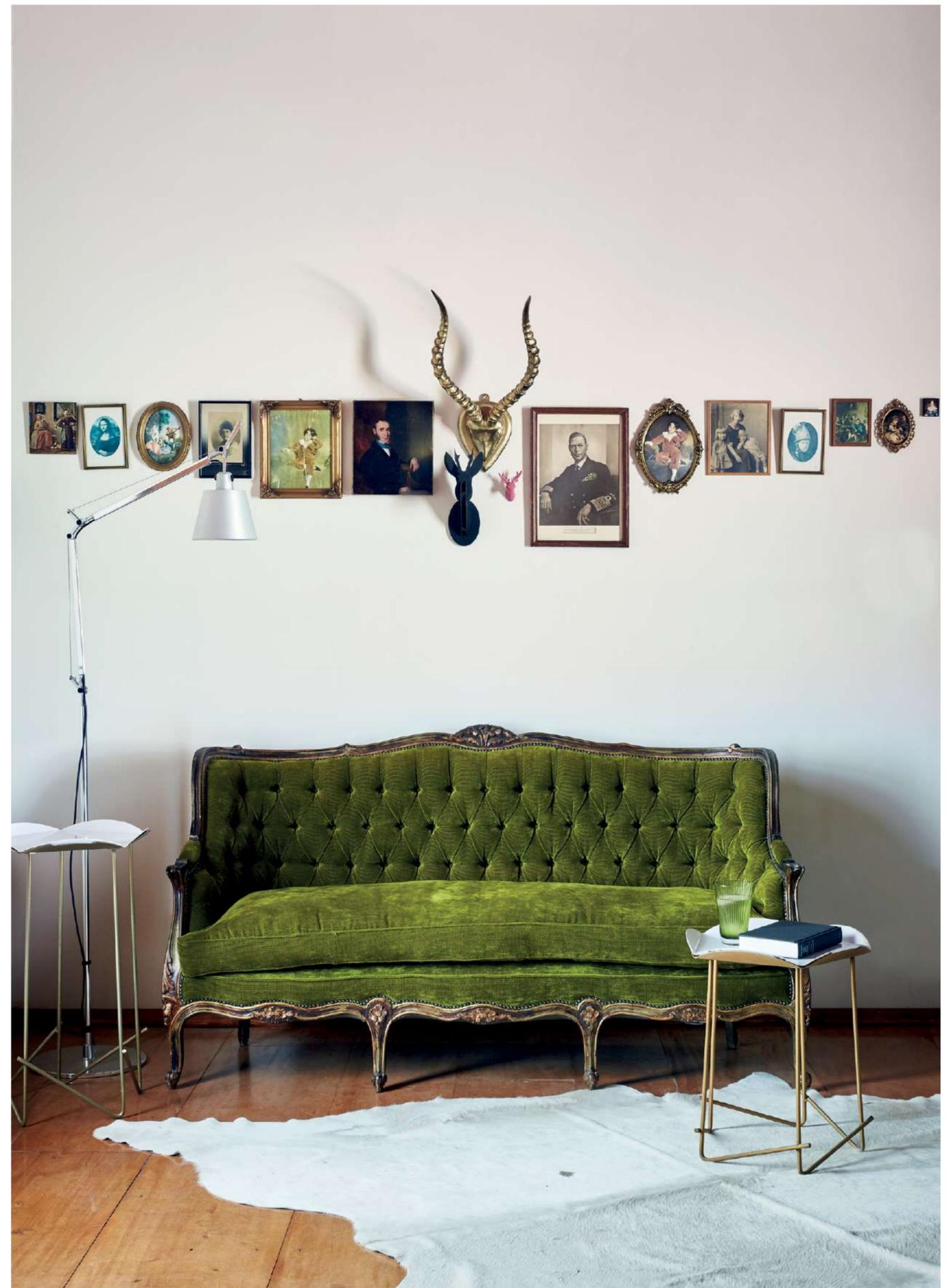
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((( The rain is always a welcome thing in South Africa. When you hear the rain on the thatch, it's a beautiful sound. But also, the smell of the wet roof is incredible. )))



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