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ALL OF US STRANGERS

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DAY TRIPPER

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SHE'S BACK!

Anne Hathaway on stardom, self-acceptance and the sequel we've all been waiting for





Clockwise from above: the farm road. A vineyard at the foot of Simonsberg mountain. Ducks looking for snails on their morning walk



Wild IMAGINATION

The author *Jessie Burton* explores the Western Cape, bringing to life a geography that had previously only existed in her mind's eye

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF BABYLONSTOREN; DOORPHOTO; RENEE KEMPS



Left: the pool-room at Babylonstoren. Below: Jessie Burton

SOUTH AFRICA'S WESTERN CAPE FIRST CAPTURED MY IMAGINATION while I was earning my living as a PA in London, at the end of the 2000s. I did not want to be a PA, and I was writing a story during my commute on the grey Jubilee Line, a tale of a 17th-century Dutch merchant family that became my first novel, *The Miniaturist*. My characters belonged in Golden Age Amsterdam, but their mirror-world existed in my mind as well – the distant, darkly sparkling Cape of Good Hope, the flip-side of the Dutch colonial coin. I longed to visit this place that had underpinned my characters' view of themselves as powerful and rich. I wanted, like them, to make the invisible real. But I did not have the money to do so; I had no means of leaving my job on an artistic whim that might well come to nothing. Instead, I read about it in books.

The Cape is, indeed, an invisible presence in *The Miniaturist*. In 1652, the Dutch East India Company arrived there and began to colonise the land that belonged to the indigenous Khoikhoi people, considering it an agricultural earthly paradise that they wanted for themselves. The colonisers grew a giant garden in that miraculous soil, feeding their fantasy of dominance in global trading. They planted orchards, vineyards, farms and dairies, vegetables, plants, herbs and spices, all to replenish their ships, which were ultimately destined for the trade route to Asia. As I plotted my first novel, I thought of these controversial and often violent figures, plotting their course. Nearly 20 years and six other novels later, I finally made it there myself.

I understand that in the intervening 373 years, in a country as complex and unique as South Africa, nothing would have remained the same. And yet: my first stop, an hour's drive from Cape Town airport, was Babylonstoren, a homestead founded in 1692. Now a working farm with 500 acres and hotel and a spa, it has a garden modelled on the Dutch East India Company design. Everything to eat and drink in its restaurants, Babel and the Greenhouse, has been nurtured in the surrounding land, farm-to-fork, a pick-clean mentality. The accommodation was absolutely exquisite: period lodgings with unobtrusive, modern touches. I was unprepared for the bounty I met there, the beauty and the warmth.

It might be better to call Babylonstoren a state of mind, for although there were wonderful things to do and things to eat and see, it felt that the overarching power of the place was actually invisible, to be found both in the earth, in the work the roots were doing in the dark, and in the quality of the sunlight. Liesl van der Walt, a master gardener at Babylonstoren, says: 'Beauty comes from the soil, from the moment you begin to dig and plant a seed. The attention you invest in it – that's what brings joy.' And something alchemical did happen to me less than an hour after my arrival,

as I wandered around the eight acres of the formal garden: the invisible began to feel tangible. The atmosphere was calm and contained. I unfurled, as if I were a plant; I meandered the pathways of flattened twigs and peach stones, considering the farm's tortoises, who had the pace just right. Guests are invited to pick the fruit, to help prune, collect the eggs, to sow or harvest, should they wish. I felt grounded, and yet entirely free.

Babylonstoren – which translates to Tower of Babel – was named after the hill beyond the farm, and as a place it feels timeless, a world of its own, sustaining itself and its people entirely. It has its own borehole source for water, drinking water becoming shower water, becoming irrigation. Waste is practically non-existent: offcuts are used in soups, sauces and flavouring, and inedible food scraps such as eggshells and coffee grounds are fed back into giant compost heaps. There is an acknowledgement here of what Mother Nature provides us, how lucky we are – and an understanding that her resources need to be protected.

On site, Babylonstoren produces three types of olive oil, 13 grape varieties, from chenin blanc to pinot noir, in the winery, essential oils in the distillery, eggs, cheeses, butters, breads and meat from its herd of Chianina cattle. There are more than 30 types of pumpkin alone, and the gardeners grow only heirloom seeds from traditional vegetables, without genetic manipulation, letting them be pollinated by insects, birds or the wind. I discovered fruit varieties uncultivated for centuries, including White Winter Pearmain, likely to be the oldest English-apple variety, dating back to the 13th century, and Dutch Saffron pears, brought to South Africa in the 17th century. Macadamia, pecan, blood orange, plum, persimmon and clementine – the provision here is poetry come to life, nature and history writing the menus. The mantra, according to Babylonstoren's growing expert Elzé Bresler, is that 'everything must taste good'. For lunch, I ate blueberries with mozzarella; at dinner, broth and lamb shoulder with a cinnamon coconut sago. That everything tasted good is too modest. This was food heaven.

Next stop was Soetmelksvlei, part of the Babylonstoren experience – a working farm 15 minutes' drive away, that still uses only methods from the 19th century. I stepped into the farmhouse and stood before the fire, catching the smell of woodsmoke before I sampled the bread that had been prepared from the mill. I marvelled at the subtle effects this place was having on me, yet again.



The boathouse at Babylonstoren. Below right: the sitting-room inside one of the hotel's garden cottages



From far left: the Butterfly room at Babylonstoren. The water buffalo tour. Above: lavender and waterblometjie (water flowers) beside the ponds. Top: an Ubuntu bowl

PHOTOGRAPHS: COURTESY OF BABYLONSTOREN, DOCKPHOTO

Time was melting, my usual problems fading away. There was so much to do, from blacksmith demonstrations to leather working, from milling the wheat to tasting the traditional spirit mampoer in a copper still.

The garden cottage I stayed in at Babylonstoren was unfussy and luxurious, designed not to overwhelm. An astonishing kitchen area with glass walls overlooked the expanse of green, and I could purchase everything I might possibly desire to cook from the farm shop, including honeybush and rooibos teas. Every night, a fire was laid; all I had to do was strike the match. I slept deeply, rising early to join the garden tour, held on alternating routes around succulents, herbs and medicinal plants. I could have chosen bread-baking, but I opted to visit the water buffalo, which produce the milk for Babylonstoren. We fed the babies, and I was enamoured of a little calf called Toska. 'My son would love this,' I thought, resolving to bring him back one day. Babylonstoren is a unique playground for children and adults alike: trees to climb, winding bike paths under a giant sky. A sunset drive through the almond orchards almost did me in: the smell of marzipan in the dusk, the beauty of the cloud-like blossoms, the small birds called yellow bishops.

I texted my husband back in London: *I don't think it gets better than this?* (thankfully, he is a very un-jealous man), but this was before I arrived at Blou. If Babylonstoren is the earth, Blou is the sea. The retreat is utter Zen, and also very secret – you can currently only stay here if you have stayed at Babylonstoren, or its sister hotel in Somerset, the Newt. An hour's flight from Cape Town, further along the ocean road, Blou is made up of just eight self-catering cottages, three of whose doors open directly onto the ocean.

I felt, somewhat, as if I had arrived at the edge of the world. The benign roar of the sea, that dramatic white noise that hit my ears, my throat and sternum. I stood on the raised deck, nothing but a shallow strip of sand between me and the water, and a pod of dolphins dipped in and out of the waves.

Blou is a dream, but it's also like home. You are truly looked after. Nothing is too much, but they know so well when it's time to leave you alone. What you are supposed to do here is not very much at all. Let go, walk by the water. A hot croissant with coffee comes for you at the morning hour you choose. Eat well, sleep long. Sit by the fire as the ocean continues its life beside you. I shall

never forget the wonder of calling this my home for two nights.

But to write a story, the traveller must return. Back in Cape Town, a seal had taken up residence in the marina just beside my last stop, the wondrous Cape Grace hotel, where the cauliflower and chickpea curry with roti was so good that I ordered the exact same again the next night. For a while, my attention alternated between this enormous seal and the view of Table Mountain from my room, and at this point in my voyage, I stopped texting updates to my husband, because I simply didn't think it would be fair.

Shopping and art were on my list for the last day, and the best pieces I found were at Zizamele Ceramics. Its gorgeous Ubuntu bowls captivated me with their detail and beauty – decorated at the rim with delicate clay-figure mothers with babies on their backs in indigo and white – and I bought as many as I could fit into my suitcase. Fittingly, I finished my exploration with an outstanding exhibition on motherhood at the South African National Gallery – never before had I seen the politics, economics, psychologies and biologies of maternity given such honest exploration by a national institution. A dizzying and deep array of paintings, poems, sculptures and textiles, both from South African and international artists, examined the joys and challenges of this seismic, yet everyday, experience.

This was, perhaps, a message from the fates. Not everything is about the past, and it was time to go home, back to my little boy. I had been so lucky, to make this pilgrimage to a place that had been on my mind for so many years – and luckier still that I could come home on a plane (and the Jubilee Line, of course), and write about this extraordinary experience. The unforgettable, bountiful, revelatory Western Cape: the real to be imagined, all over again.

Scott Dunn (scottdunn.com; 020 4600 5396) offers six nights (two nights each at Babylonstoren, Blou and Cape Grace), from £4,760 a person B&B, based on two adults sharing, including international flights from London, domestic flights from Cape Town to George and private transfers. □

Babylonstoren is a playground: trees to climb, winding bike paths under a giant sky

