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January 25 - January 31 2024

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GETTING SMOKED

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By Giulietta Talevi and Jaco Visser



life



TRAVEL

BABYLONSTOREN: SA'S OWN EDEN

Babylonstoren is all about bringing together the rustic and the contemporary. From its famed gardens to its retail spaces and spa, it's about innovation and attention to detail

Adele Shevel

Immaculate gardens set the scene for a meander around wine estate Babylonstoren. With edible flowers, seasonal vegetables, succulents and spices, the farm is home to more than 300 varieties of

plants and vegetables with nutritional or medicinal value. And guests can pick and nibble the fresh produce as they wander through this Eden.

Slightly further afield are the figs, prickly pears, persimmons, stone fruit, citrus and olives (14 varieties over 60ha) — and, of

course, the wine grapes (13 varieties over 120ha).

This is a place of careful attention to detail — an innovative space, from design down to operations; it operates like a well (olive) oiled machine. The paths, for example, tell you which part of the orchard you're in (those made of stones indicate you're in the soft fruit orchard) and each space is maintained by a dedicated team — precision at work.

It's no surprise that the garden is a horticultural won-

derland. A guide tells the FM that Babylonstoren's owners — media and tech titan Koos Bekker and his wife, former magazine décor editor and style maven Karen Roos — sought out experts at every turn. The formal gardens, for example, were designed by French architect Patrice Taravella. His work at Prieure Notre Dame d'Orsan in France had impressed Roos, who was drawn to the inherent discipline in his creations. And it turns out Babylonstoren is one of only two Royal Horticultural Society partner gardens in Africa.

Set near Paarl and Franschhoek, this is one of the oldest working Cape Dutch farms in the region, dating back to the 18th century. But its contemporary look took form in the hands of Bekker and Roos after they bought the estate in 2007. Though they'd initially

sought a private weekend retreat, it didn't take them long to decide the gardens had to be shared with the public, and they opened the estate in 2010 after a full revamp.

New offerings soon followed: a farm shop, butchery, bakery, coffee shop, and store for dairy essentials — each a rustic stop, with a touch of glamour.

The estate also recently opened a Story of Wine museum and, with the purchase of the adjacent Backsberg wine estate two years ago, there will no doubt be further additions to what's on offer.

There's a lot of retail going on, from fresh farm produce to baked goods, from croissants to rustic loaves — and there's a new gelato shop. Olives, almonds and fresh produce are hardly new age, but the packaging is gorgeous. And you can order these goods — with free delivery — in urban centres such as Joburg and Cape Town.

Then there are items such as gold hosepipes and spades for more than R1,000, which make the garden shop feel more Harrods than your local neighbourhood store.

So it's perhaps understandable that locals may feel a bit overwhelmed: this is no longer a place they can pop into to buy bread, milk and a few bits and bobs. Today, there's a tick-

et office and entrance fee — though a guide tells the FM that R100 gives annual membership and access, and this money provides the farmworkers with proper meals every day of the year.

Last year, Babylonstoren opened a new hot spa (hotel guests have 24-hour access). It's one of the few facilities in South Africa to offer a Turkish bath, or hammam — along with the sauna and steam rooms — and there's also a traditional Rasul chamber.

The large indoor-outdoor pool area allows you to connect with nature, with views of the vineyards and blue sky through large windows. You can also order some home-grown fare from the Greenhouse Restaurant menu here.

There are several hotel options for those looking to stay over, with rooms that offer a rustic elegance that is both stylish and inviting. The garden cottages have thick white-washed walls and hearty fireplaces. Inside, Cape Dutch meets Scandi chic. The cottage the FM stayed in had a glass extension to the kitchen that felt like its own conservatory, offering views into the vineyards.

Then there's the food. Dinner at Babel was delicious and in line with the farm-to-table theme, with only the freshest ingredients on offer and

presented in a sophisticated manner. Still, it's not overly complicated fare; expect lots of fresh food and herbs.

Lovely touches included giving flowers to women celebrating their birthdays, and allowing children to

pick fresh strawberries from a bountiful basket.

The breakfasts are on another level, with colourful fruit creating an artful display, and seasonal juices include a tangerine-coloured prickly pear. What isn't produced in-house is sourced locally.

Babylonstoren has been a huge success — it's a regular on global must-see lists, and in recent years it's been recognised by Condé Nast as the No 1 hotel in Southern Africa (2022), and by Travel & Leisure readers as the best resort in Africa (2023).

A sensory delight

There's no shortage of tours on offer at the estate. For a start, there's the wine cellar tour, which culminates with a sit-down tasting. And, of course, the guided garden walkabout.

There's the driving tour of the Simonsberg mountains (which offers striking views of Table Mountain and, most clearly, Paarl Rock), as well as

wine, olive oil and balsamic vinegar tours. On the water buffalo cheese tour you get to watch the milking process and feed the water buffalo calves before enjoying a breakfast of mozzarella, yoghurt and butter

made from the herd's milk.

Part of the charm of the whole experience comes from the guides, who are informative and engaging. They offer interesting nuggets and insight, and show a real knowledge of a region they feel passionate about.

Babylonstoren is a sensory delight, geared towards sophisticated rural living, with homage paid to the farm's traditional heritage — and that of South Africa (national symbols such as the springbok, protea and yellowwood feature in the design). There's layer upon layer of attention to detail — which makes it worth exploring at your leisure.

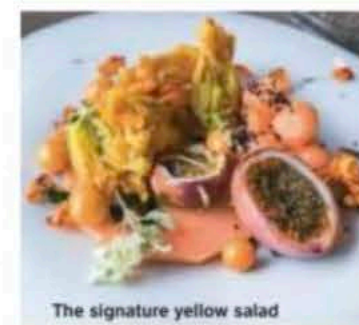
The FM's visit was just a night and a day — offering time for walks, tours, wine tastings and more than one trip to the spa — but to make the most of the 200ha estate and let it ground you, you'll need more time there.

To tap into that sense of calm, you just need to think of swimming in the 16m heated pool beneath a glass-pannelled pitched roof, while looking at vineyards and blue sky. X

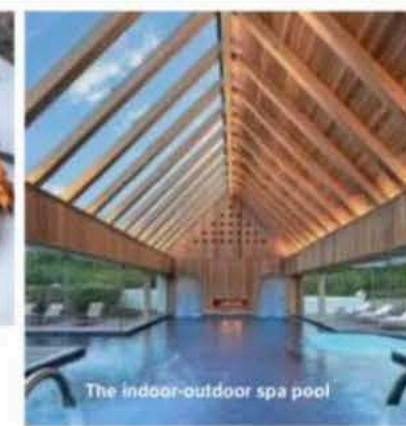
The writer was a guest of Babylonstoren



The 18th-century manor house



The signature yellow salad



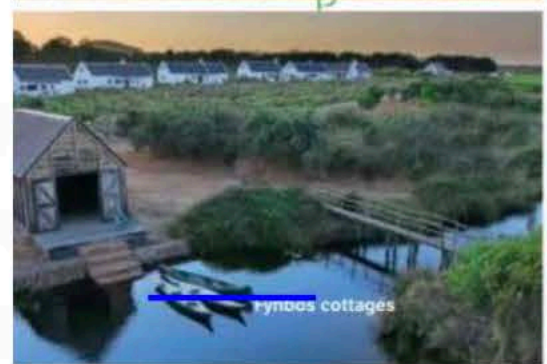
The indoor-outdoor spa pool



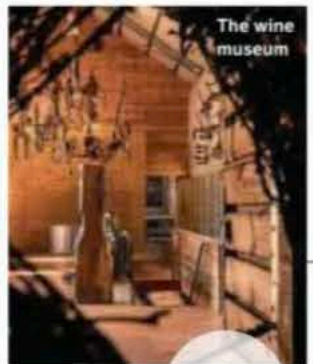
Photos courtesy of Babylonstoren



The Greenhouse restaurant



synoos cottages



The wine museum