

A new kind of country getaway

 By [Jessica Taylor](#)

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In the historically inspired restoration of one of the Cape Winelands' oldest estates, owners Koos Bekker and wife Karen Roos, with the help of their dedicated staff, have created a new kind of country getaway - a working farm that is also a boutique hotel and spa where guests can enjoy the wonderful pleasure of picking their own biodynamic fruit and vegetables from the garden that's become the heart of this home away from home.

It was its innovative Babel restaurant that first lured me to Babylonstoren, only to be captured by glimpses into a magical world behind the grapefruit orchard along the 'ringmuur' from the Simonsberg that's been the lifeblood of the farm for over 300 years.



My eagerness for adventure and love for exploring led me to make a booking for a night's stay at the farm's hotel. This entailed filling out a comprehensive 'Tell us more' form for them to personalise the experience, such as your interests on the farm and in the area, whether you're celebrating anything, your Wellington boot size, meal and activity options, and beverages for them to stock your fridge accordingly.

On arrival, while walking along the straight gravel path between landhuisen to the spa, there was something familial about the place. Perhaps it was being greeted on first-name basis or the spacious layout of the white-and-forest green-trimmed, 18th century-style farmhouse exteriors amongst old oaks and olives, that make up a little country village where you naturally feel a sense of belonging.

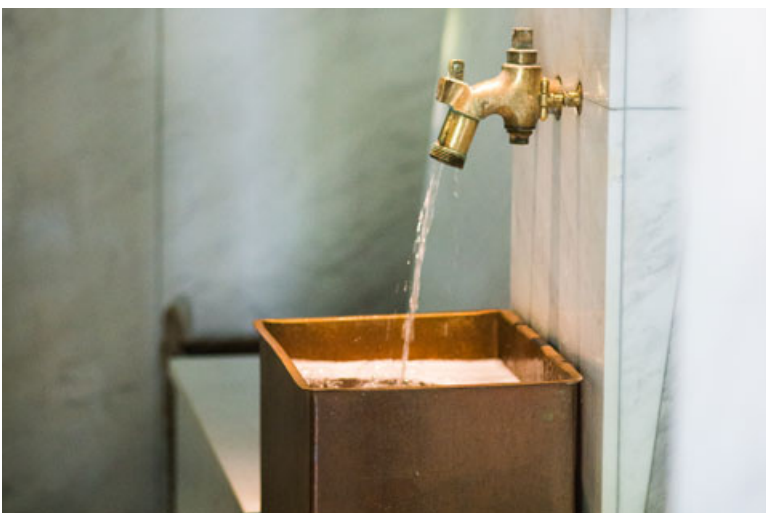


A ritual that I could get used to

Guests are encouraged to ground themselves, and at the semi-outdoor Garden Spa (at the end of the pathway) it's hard not to, especially when you're asked to remove your shoes on entering the sanctuary.

It's one of two spas in South Africa that has a hammam (Turkish bath), so I treated myself to their signature treatment: the Private Hammam Water Ritual.

Undecidedly walking into the heated, steam-filled hammam, unsure of what to expect, I was asked to sit beside the basin with a running tap and given their homemade olive oil soap and a bowl with which to draw warm water to wash myself.



I was then kindly asked to lay on the marble block in the middle of the hammam, which was followed by a full-body

exfoliation, dynamic flexing, a relaxing Africology body butter massage, head-and-scalp massage and cleanse. Between treatments, the therapist would continuously pour warm water from my feet, gushing up to my neck and around the back of my head. It felt as if I was lying on a shore with waves of warm fresh water encompassing me.

After drying myself off, I had a moment to rehydrate with spring water and a bowl of a sliced green apple and ruby grapefruit freshly picked from a nearby tree.

The treatment is 60 minutes and costs R1,290, and for the unique, ultimate spa experience that it is, a stay at Babylonstoren without treating yourself to this absolute indulgence is a sin. Also included is a lunch of either a delicate ribbon vegetable salad with salad greens, fruit, fragrant herbs and pansies served with a ginger-and-sesame dressing or a warm dish of lentils and wild mushrooms with a coriander-and-miso dressing, as well as fresh fruit juice - yellow, green or red - delivered in a wooden crate from The Tea Garden next door.

Besides the hammam, sauna, ice bath and jet pool, the spa also has a gym that looks onto the formal yet unconventional, cleverly landscaped garden, and hosts a yoga class on Friday mornings at 7.30am.

Oos, Wes, tuis bes

After checking in, I was shown to my landhuisie. Mine was a spacious two-bedroomed self-catering cottage. The five-star 'hotel', unlike any other I've ever come across, is made up of 14 self-standing landhuisies, seven of which have their own well-stocked, glass-enclosed open-plan kitchens from a Smeg oven to Babylonstoren's cellar-produced olive oil, and guests are encouraged to pick fresh fruit and vegetables from the garden at their leisure.



The interiors are described as "appropriately plain, yet utterly luxurious, a mix of modern basics with antique pieces and stylish touches: a Magis Puppy Dog, a canvas wardrobe, a Xavier Lust hat stand". While I enjoy tasteful design and decoration, what I appreciated most was the bespoke service and thoughtfulness down to the last detail, like the sweet non-slip slippers, the gumboots in my size, an umbrella for the drizzly afternoon and an extra laundry bag for my hand washing.

After getting the fire going, which the staff are more than happy to assist with, I delved into the impressive choice of literature on the bookshelf that divides the glass-enclosed kitchen and dining area from the lounge.

Before dark, after the day visitors had left and the farm workers retreated to their compound, I put my gumboots on and bundu bashed my way to the garden that "makes a playful nod to the fabled gardens of Babylon" - the child in me came out to play; I felt free (and safe) to wander to my heart's content. Not a care in the world. So close to home, yet more far away than I've been since I was a little blonde-bobbed girl.

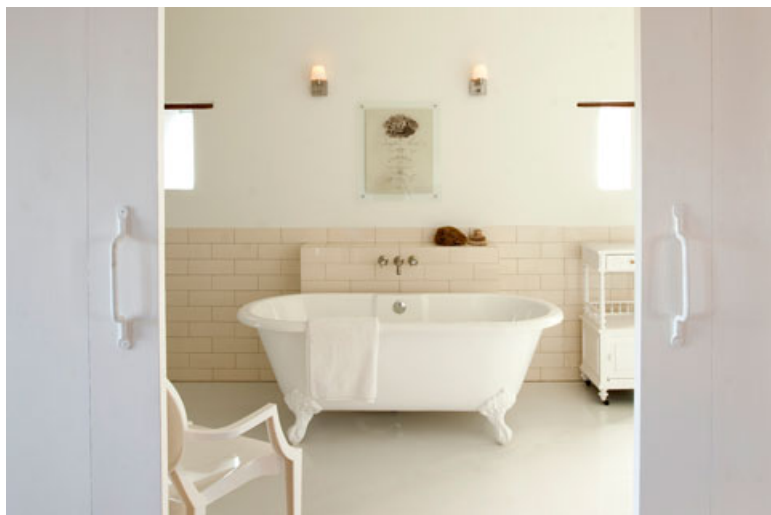
When I was getting dressed up to go out for supper, someone knocked on the door to surprise me with a complimentary glass of sparkling wine and dark chocolate truffle.

It was a Wednesday night, so I had the option of booking for the gourmet pizza evening at The Bakery (exclusively for hotel guests). I had a glass of Babylonstoren's Chardonnay, which is their flagship white (the Mourvedre Rosé is also delightful), a starter of Shitake mushrooms served with pan-fried polenta and parmesan cream, and wood-fired pizzas as main course. The classic margarita was garnished with fresh basil; although not as innovative as the others, it seemed to be the favourite. It's the flavoursome freshness of the home-grown ingredients that can make something as basic as a margarita so worthy of praise. But it was the simplicity of the dessert that I enjoyed most: bruléed Cara Cara blood orange with Eureka lemon ice cream.



While enjoying this intimate, candlelit supper, unbeknown to me, housekeeping was providing a turndown service. Lo and behold, my landhuisie had been transformed into a palace. Not only had my bed linen been turned down, they also kept my fire going, closed the blinds and shutters, turned on the underfloor heating and placed a beautifully wrapped chocolate brownie on my pillow. This really is a royal service fit for kings and queens.

Bath time was a spa-like experience in itself. The freestanding Victoria + Alfred bath was furnished with L'Occitane's pure vegetable soap with shea butter, as well as its Verbena shampoo, conditioner and body lotion, and a handmade bouquet garni from the fragrant herb patch, which you put into the tub when pouring your bath and can use as a loofah for natural exfoliation. I couldn't have imagined a better ending to a day of pure rejuvenation and spoils.



Cock-a-doodle-doo

Awaking to a distant rooster's crow was a gentle reminder that I was still living the dream.

I happened to wake up on the wrong side of the bed, but it was nothing an inclusive farm breakfast at Babel couldn't fix. My waitress, Maranda could tell I was under the weather, so she put her arm around me as she showed me to my table and

gave me a kiss on my forehead after I had been seated, and this random act of genuine love and care is just one example of the extraordinary sense of community on the farm.

The breakfast menu - besides a bountiful buffet of cured meats, cheeses, breads warm out of the oven, like pear and gorgonzola (with a whole pear baked in the middle), fruits, yoghurt and granola - offers three options. The chef's choice of the day being warm pumpkin fritters with citrus vanilla butter, maple glazed bacon and toasted pumpkin seeds.



While the farm is well known for its frequented Babel restaurant that makes use of fresh, seasonal ingredients handpicked from the garden, from the other side of the grapefruit orchard, I now have new ground to stand on when I say that with its hotel and spa, Babylonstoren truly is the ultimate country getaway. And I haven't even really mentioned the garden, but that's a story in itself...

Activities on the farm include: the garden tour; the cellar tour (olive oil, mampoer and wine); a farm walk and tour; riding bikes to the plaasdam, baking bread in The Bakery and collecting hens' eggs.

www.babylonstoren.com

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ABOUT JESSICA TAYLOR

Jess is Senior Editor: Marketing & Media at Bizcommunity.com. She is also a contributing writer. marketingnews@bizcommunity.com

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