



Brian Berkman's

LUXURY WORLD UPDATE



THE LUXURY OF KNOWING

There is a wonderful comfort in knowing how something feels – even difficult and unpleasant things tend to feel less than we imagine they will. We have recently had a major burglary where a number of high-ticket items were taken. Indignation about the invasion, and irritation at the inconvenience of replacing things aside, the only loss I felt was from things of sentimental value. There is also the shattering of the illusion that we were safe in our house – some beliefs need to be tested.

The luxury is in knowing what matters most and, in my case, it seem to be the things that cost the least.



THE LUXURY MEAL

I can't think when last I was this excited about a restaurant. If I had a mantra to define the kind of food I want to eat, it would be this: simple dishes with the best quality local ingredients, treated respectfully. Babel Restaurant at Babylonstoren Farm near Franschhoek has set the benchmark for what I'd like to see more of at every restaurant.

Locavores in particular will love it, as much (and in the near future most) of the produce on the menu comes from Babylonstoren's own gardens – eight acres planted with fruit and vegetables along classical lines. A special treat, if you can arrange it, is to have Gundula show you around.

The food at Babel is entirely informed by what is in season. The inspiration comes from foodie and stylist Maranda Engelbrecht, who Capetonians will remember from Manna in Kloof Street.

Two historic stone basins that might even have been the troughs from which the cattle would drink are now at the centre of the restaurant.

The barn-style space has all-glass walls and doors so the effect is bright and airy, with low kraal walls around the perimeter. Tables are also available outside and, in time, there will be picnics served on herb-scented green patches in the gardens.



There is a small shop that sells posies of just-picked herbs and vegetables in brown paper bags. You can also buy, as I did, a hat and a pair of Wellies to go walking with in the gardens.

The brightness of natural light also makes what's on the plate shine in a way that food indoors never does. And, because the produce a few hours previously was still living in the ground, it is an opportunity to taste food the way nature intended it should.



Start with salad. Select the colour you'd like and the kitchen will do the rest. Of the dishes I tasted, the salads excited me most. I imagined, albeit just for a moment, that I'd be happy just to live on raw salads and fresh air. I'm sure you can imagine how special such a salad would have to be.

I ordered the Yellow (R45) salad with papino, butternut, gooseberries, granadilla, kohlrabi, carrot, avocado, pineapple, pineapple sage, potato dressed in orange and cardamom. There are also four protein choices – the most fabulous yogurt cheese from nearby Dalewood Farm, smoked chicken, poached eggs (free range, of course) and smoked Franschoek trout. (R25-R35).

JP ordered the Green (R55) and got kohlrabi, apple, celery, rocket, pea shoots, artichoke, avocado, potato, basil and mustard leaf with a green cavello nero (my new favourite plant that looks like black mini palm trees) pesto dressing.

Repeating the simplicity mantra, mains of 400g (R145) coriander chargrilled rib-eye on the bone (served sliced) with salsa verde was pleasing, but needed a lot of chewing and extra salt. I would have liked a sauce in addition to the salsa verde.



The Coriander and Wild Mountain Rosemary marinated lamb cutlets served with a minty pomegranate dressing were well cooked and tasty, but we've had more flavourful lamb elsewhere. Eat here just for the perfect chips – crispy outside and soft inside.

As simple as the starters and mains were, the desserts (R45-R55) in either sour, bitter or savoury notes, were complex and innovative. The combination of chocolate, olives, coffee and walnuts for the bitter offering is sublime. The savoury gorgonzola and rosemary crême brulee with balsamic reduction and crispy Serrano ham is unexpectedly delightful.

Babel at Babylonstoren is open Wednesday to Sunday, between 10am and 4pm.
021-863-3852.



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THE LUXURY OF HISTORY

Two Cape properties celebrating different parts of our heritage, The Dutch Manor and Constantia Woods, are linked by the passion their owning families have for collecting and restoring properties.

The Dutch Manor Antique Hotel, a restoration of an 1812 home, 1950's hotel and most recently previously used as an attorney's offices, has been magnificently restored by a Vereeniging legal man and his wife, both avid collectors of Cape Dutch pieces.

Eric and Elizabeth Lyell enlisted the help of the restorer who worked on The Castle of Good Hope and Stellenbosch Afrikaner antique specialists Pier and Jo-Marie Rabe.



The mahogany writing desk in the foyer belonged to the minister from the nearby church in Strand Street, while the magnificent armoires are from the same period. Jan van Riebeeck would feel quite at home here, and so did we, thanks to the owners' understanding that no matter how passionate one is about living with antiques, bathrooms must be spacious and modern with high-pressure showers and heated towel rails.

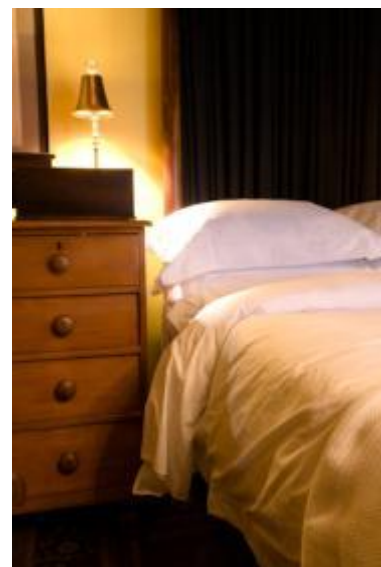
We found our beautiful four-poster bed in the red-accented Room 5 a little too cosy for two ample frames and will probably opt for two larger single beds in another room when we return.

I also enjoyed the sound of the muezzins from the Bo Kaap mosques and found the location on the corner of Leeuwen Street and Buitengracht brilliantly convenient to reach the Waterfront or Southern Suburb highways within five minutes either way.

There are only eight rooms which gives guests at The Dutch Manor the wonderful feeling of being at home with friends rather than in a hotel and I can see why, despite only opening in September 2009, it is already a hit with business travelers. You'll meet Eric and Elizabeth's daughter Yanic Smit who runs the hotel. With her marketing background she's recognized that being an active member in the Bo Kaap community has opened doors to the best local food and experiences for visitors so while only breakfast is included in your rate, you won't go hungry.

I love this hotel because it provides museum-quality antique pieces with homely service and essentials like free Wi-Fi, large, flat-screen TVs and high-thread count linens.

Dutch Manor Antique Hotel, 158 Buitengracht Street, Cape Town. 021-422-4767
www.dutchmanor.co.za



In the 1940's life in leafy Constantia was peaceful. It was rural farmland very different from the subdivided plots with extravagant homes it now is. Third-generation Constantia resident, Clive McDowell of Constantia Woods, reminds me of an English aristocrat who has to sell his chattels to meet the high costs of maintaining grand grounds and an ancestral home.

In this case, this specialist, environmentalist-botanist turned hotelier is selling bed nights rather than oil paintings to allow him to continue his joint passions – succulents and indigenous flora and collecting and restoring vintage and antique pieces. Together with his wife Camilla, Clive has collected an enviable array of Victorian and Edwardian furniture and, in particular, sanitaryware which they have restored into the largest claimed collection of working antique toilets.

The McDowell's have purchased adjoining properties which now make up Constantia Woods, a six-acre collection of four separate homesteads: Rosewoods, Cedarwoods, Cherrywoods and Bonair, together with a number of cottages that span between Constantia Main Road and Price Drive.

Just to be among these glorious gardens, with more than 600 species, is reason enough to visit and for guests who are interested in living the way people did a century ago, there are many rewards. I found the interior of our Continental suite fussy and cluttered and feared that I'd knock down some priceless antique or Art Nouveau light fittings, smashing them into smithereens.

Perhaps I'd enjoy staying in their simpler accommodation (like a self-catering unit with fab 1950's kitchen) but truth is I prefer tea in my Royal Doulton rather than depositing the day's waste, despite it being the prettiest toilet I have ever sat upon.

Equally, I prefer contemporary single-mixer showers over the wood and glass enclosed Edwardian shower unit encircled by copper pipes (probably rescued from a hospital as homes didn't have showers in those days).

A real treat is to have Clive walk with you through the estate, pointing out the original pear grove and 1940's Rose cultivars, no longer available.

Constantia Woods is also available for meetings and small conferences and an original barn is being converted into a wedding venue as an adjunct to the manicured lawn which is perfect for a marquee.



Constantia Woods www.constantiawoods.com 021 794 5888



THE LUXURY GIVEAWAY



Four Luxury Update readers can receive an Archive Travellers set of 35g soap, 50g soap, 45ml Body Wash, 45ml Body Lotion and a sachet of Mineral Bath Salts, each valued at R120. Just email LuxuryUpdate@BrianBerkman.com with Archive Giveaway as the subject.

Archive is a sophisticated brand created from ingredients harvested from old family recipes. Timeless aromatherapy essential oil blends available in Green Tea & Willow (relaxing), Grapefruit & Neroli (energising) and Rosehips & Lavender (calming). These refreshing fragrances are housed in vintage-inspired packaging.



Thanks to Laurence Graff (left), visitors to Delaire Graff Estate in Stellenbosch can purchase a branded keepsake as well as kit out the entire family in safari-friendly linen before heading into the bush.

Forget the peak cap, this keepsake is a not-so-little yellow diamond. In fact, The Delaire Sunrise is the largest Fancy Vivid Yellow Square Emerald-cut diamond. And, to ensure you don't rack up the carbon miles yourself, you can have the 118 carats gem delivered to you at Graff Diamond's bijou new salon on the estate in Stellenbosch.

With your Delaire Sunrise in hand, next stop is 100% Capri (see below) for the most fabulous linen garb this side of Italy. Lovely that you've decided to donate last season's wardrobe you brought along to the Salvation Army, 100% Capri will ensure you have eco-friendly threads in natural tones to wear while in Africa. www.delaire.co.za



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