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SOUTH AFRICA

A homecoming at BABYLONSTOREN

BABYLONSTOREN'S GREATEST TRUMP CARD? It doesn't feel like a hotel. You reach it by driving off the dusty cape roads through vines and fruit trees. Tractors trundle by, laden with grapes and peaches. The restaurant is in an old cowshed. Ducks waddle past. A donkey puts out its nose for children to pat. It's a place where you instantly feel at home (albeit one surrounded by the towering Simonsberg Mountains, rolling vineyards, and miles of fragrant indigenous fynbos shrubland). This is in large part because the 500-acre 17th-century Cape Dutch estate is still an actual home—belonging to Karen Roos, the former editor of South African *Elle Decoration*, who spent years creating an eight-acre Patrice Taravella-designed formal garden containing more than 300 varieties of medicinal and edible plants, and then wanted to share it with others.

Having spent her life conceiving elegant new spaces, Roos constantly changes things up. Babylonstoren opened in 2010 with

13 little Cape Dutch farm workers' cottages beside the garden, each with a modernist glass "box" kitchen in which guests could cook fresh farm ingredients to enjoy by the fire in the spacious and bright contemporary interiors. Next, Roos converted the barns and stables to add characterful guest spaces. In the past few years, the creative hotelier has added a smattering of equally charming cottages among the fynbos, away from the public areas and surrounded by native landscaping, the better for admiring the rugged mountainscapes. I've been five times, and each time I return, there's something fresh and chic to explore: a farm shop stocked with tempting local cheese and Cape gooseberry jams; a bakery, which at night is transformed into a wood-fired-pizza restaurant; and, most recently, a wine cellar and museum.

You can take a zippy golf cart from your cottage down to the public areas and walk in the sprawling gardens, with their chicken

runs and beehives and rose-scented paths. Or you can have brunch, or a long, lazy lunch, in the Greenhouse or Babel restaurant, then have a hammam and massage in the recently added spa. Or you can do as I did on my last stay and retreat into nature, quietly fishing and kayaking on small dams, cycling amid fynbos in the hills, and lounging beside the new pool and hot tub, surrounded by rock gardens. Then, after a glass of wine at sunset, hang out in your light-filled, whitewashed cottage, cooking just-picked produce in your kitchen, listening to music and reading by the fire on Italian linen-clad sofas, and soaking in a deep bathtub fragrant with fresh herbs before a nightcap on the little veranda, the air thick with silence and lit by the moon and Milky Way. Babylonstoren paved the way for cool farm stays, but few of its successors can come close to matching the original. *From \$525; babylonstoren.com*

LISA GRAINGER

PHOTOGRAPHS: CROOKES & JACKSON, CHRIS SCHALKX