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# DECOR



HOT TOPIC

## CAPE DUTCH

This home at Baby'onstoren, Western Cape, displays an effortless blend of authentic historical architecture and modern touches. This is clear in the sitting room, where a whimsical vignette of random junk shop portraits sits atop an antique French daybed. History informs each room, but they are never outdated, an inspiration we can take into our homes.

# Pastoral Perfection

Simplicity, authenticity and practical magic define the traditional Cape Dutch homestead at Babylonstoren

BY SALLY RUTHERFORD



## Cape Dutch

First built in 1777, the homestead at Babylonstoren is an outstanding example of Cape Dutch architecture, with its typical symmetry, thick whitewashed walls, gables and pitched reed-thatch roof. Owner Karen Roos has carefully restored the home with characteristic integrity, ensuring that its sympathetic relationship with the climate and surrounding Drakenstein Valley remains undisturbed.



was in the days it was first settled – when the Dutch made it a halfway point between the West and the Orient – and the historical layering in the interiors says as much about her as it does about the home. The South African-born style maven has spent many years living abroad, and her appreciation for cultural diversity can be seen in cosmopolitan historical references as well as contemporary touches that add the freshness that defines Babylonstoren.

Whereas the sitting room and bedrooms are the essence of comfortable, traditional minimalism, the library-cum-study is a wonder room! Cabinets of curiosities are filled with fascinating collections and objets, from shards of pottery dug up on the farm and original VOC Delftware to massive ammonites and an encyclopaedic collection of butterflies. Where the sitting room – with its contemporary linen, leather and steel furnishings that meld seamlessly with the 240-year-old structure – is cool and calm, the library is endlessly stimulating and interesting. That said, a scarlet-covered couch is the perfect place for an afternoon nap in front of the fireplace lined with narrow klompje bricks.

### ← History

The home's traditional *voorkamer* is a glorious wonder room that showcases the farm's fascinating history. Karen Roos has curated a magnificent collection of archaeological finds from the farm itself, books, ceramics and natural history displays. The fireplace, which features traditional narrow klompje bricks, is surrounded by a marble mantelpiece from Pierre de Bourgogne. A retro Artemide pendant light by Enzo Mari and Giancarlo Fassina is a fresh and pleasing contemporary touch. That this is a room to relax in is evident in the many inviting sitting areas.

### ↙ Sitting room

Owner Karen Roos painstakingly removed 23 successive layers of paint to discover the original ochre-hued brown wall paint finely edged with stripes of teal, cream and dark brown, which she replicated exactly. The ornate built-in teak wall cabinets are perfectly preserved original features. This sitting room forms the crossbar of the home's traditional H-structure – as such, it has doors linking to the two perpendicular rear wings of the house. To the left is the door leading to the master bedroom suite; to the right is the kitchen.



It is fitting that this home, which has been continuously occupied for 240 years, is no stiff museum piece. Its interiors pay tribute to its traditional heritage, but it is Karen's appreciation for contemporary aesthetics that brings the Owners' House to life. The en-suite bathrooms are a wonderful example of this. Individual in style, they evoke a grand era of Edwardian spas and the lavish luxury of indoor plumbing. You may find yourself looking

for excuses to splash about in the massive circular bath or languish under the rain shower in the wet room.

All in all, the Babylonstoren Manor House is a living, fresh celebration of traditional and authentic Cape Dutch style. Karen Roos's interpretation connects the past to the future in the most gracious and subtle of styles, truly making it feel like home.

### Kitchen

The farmhouse kitchen is furnished with utter simplicity yet always with an eye to efficiency and comfort. The contemporary Smeg fridge and wood-burning Aga stove are entirely at home in this practical, utilitarian and lived-in space.



The air, heavy in the late afternoon sunshine, hums with the work of countless bees in Babylonstoren's garden of Eden. Here owners Karen Roos and Koos Bekker grow over 300 varieties of edible or medicinal plants in the extraordinary gardens inspired by the farms that resupplied ships passing the Cape of Good Hope in 1692, which was when the farm was first granted to burgher (citizen) Pieter van der Byl. Today, the werf (farmyard) and its structures remain among the finest unspoilt examples of traditional Cape Dutch architectural styles. In this positively utopian setting in South Africa's Cape Winelands, the Owners' House is irresistible. Karen's deft touch and nuanced appreciation of tradition are unmistakable in the simplicity and honesty of her traditional Cape Dutch homestead, which has been not so much restored as reinvigorated.

The farmhouse itself dates back to 1777. When Karen and Koos first bought Babylonstoren as their weekend retreat, one of its many attractions for Karen was the fact that the house had never

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Karen's nuanced appreciation of tradition is unmistakable

been officially 'restored'. In fact, the most recent work dated back to 1931 when a Victorian renovation that had removed the gables was undone and the gables replaced.

Surely one of the clearest signs of her commitment to authenticity is in the central sitting room: here she supervised the painstaking removal of 23 layers of paint to reveal the original ochre-hued brown wall paint finely edged with stripes of teal, cream and dark brown. This colour was exactly matched and the room carefully repainted in its original hues. 'It has the benefit of downplaying the heaviness of the dark wood built-in cupboards the Dutch loved so much,' says Karen. 'They have the potential to be overwhelming if the walls are whitewashed but here they just melt in with the original wall colour.'

The home's traditional H-shape layout has been honoured and original fittings throughout have been reconditioned to their original splendour – worn flagstones polished to a high gloss, wide yellowwood floorboards and ceiling beams, wooden windows and sills set deep into the thick clays walls built by the Dutch to beat the African heat. Despite the grand heritage of Babylonstoren, this is unmistakably a farmhouse: fittingly, much of the action takes place in the kitchen, which serves as a cooking space and gathering place. In front of the huge open hearth is an enormous refectory table where the family reconnects and refuels, and friends kuier (visit). Cooking takes place right there at the Aga gas hob and wood-burning stove. In true Karen style, the kitchen chandelier – made from an antique wine-bottle drier – is rustic yet with a contemporary air. The home is no museum: the sensibility is authentic but unfailingly modern.

Karen herself is as cosmopolitan as the Cape

#### ↖ **Voorkamer**

The floor-to-near-ceiling-high windows in the *voorkamer* are typical of Cape Dutch homes. The window reveals are deep-set, showing the thickness of the stone and clay brick walls built to withstand the intense summer heat of the Cape Winelands. To the right of the teak corner cabinet, which came with the house, is one of the cabinets housing the home's remarkable collection of butterflies. The curvaceous Norman Cherner vintage chair is perfectly at home in this eclectic yet cohesive space

#### ↑ **Local finds**

An extensive butterfly collection is just one of the fascinating finds you can explore in the *voorkamer*.

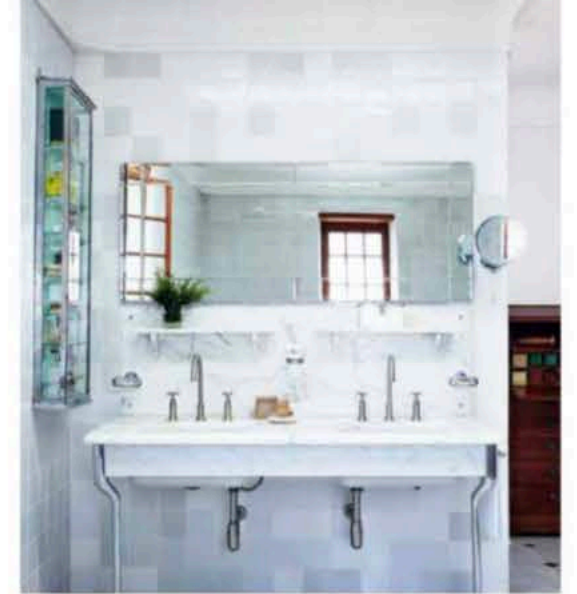


#### **Old meets new**

The cool interiors are a successful blend of finely restored original fittings and contemporary furnishings that merge seamlessly to create a truly inviting space. The original flagstones leading from the front door to the sitting room are polished to high gloss. The beautiful double door with its elegant fanlight opens into the sitting room, which is furnished with cream sofas by Philippe Starck for Driade, luxurious leather armchairs by Citterio for Flexform and an Artemide floor lamp, all from Lime|line.

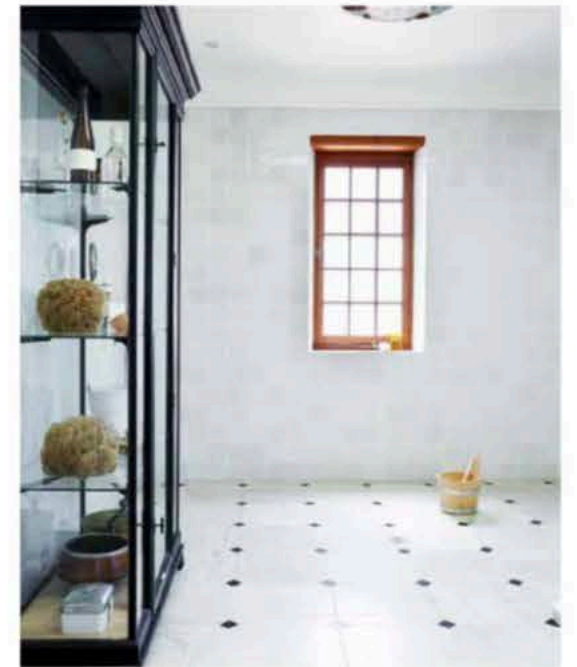
**Vignette**

The central sitting room gives way to the master bedroom suite, where a deep-buttoned, antique French day bed is topped with a whimsical vignette of random junk-shop portraits. The wide yellowwood floor beams are typical of an era in which massive trees were still plentiful, before the widespread indigenous forests that once covered the local mountain slopes were felled to supply the then-flourishing shipping industry.



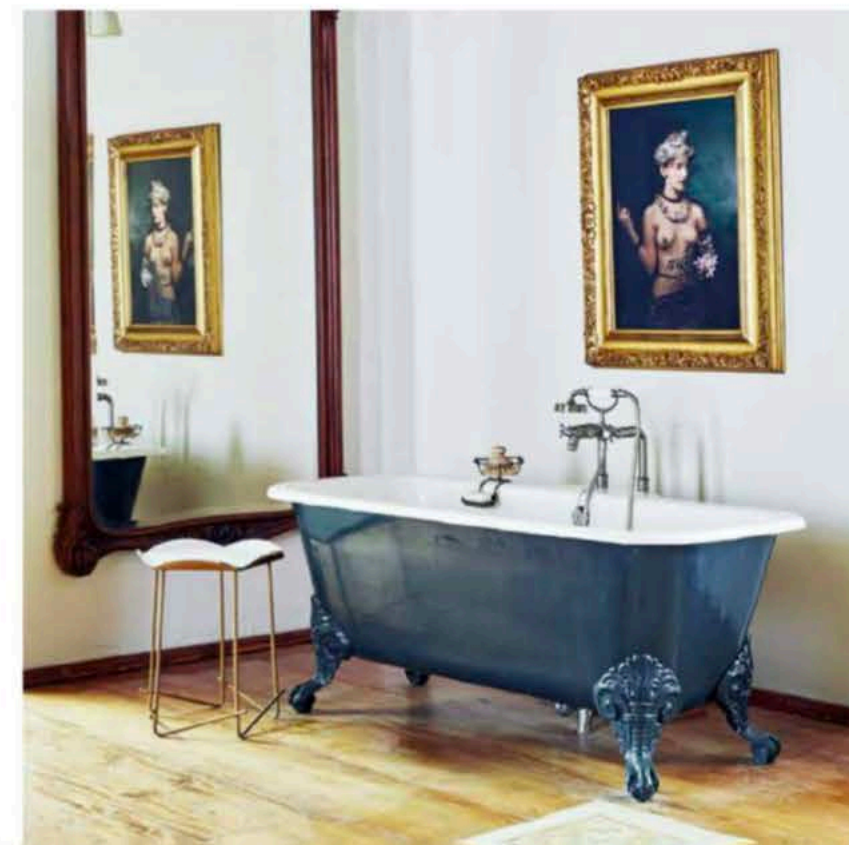
↑ **Bedroom**

Despite its simplicity, this bedroom is a beautiful example of restrained luxury, from the king-size bed to the deep-pile Aubusson carpet. The hand-painted Chinese room divider conceals a Victorian-style bathtub in the corner of the bedroom.



**Bathroom** ↘

The deep Victorian-style bathtub is a delightful modern indulgence. The carved framed mirror is an antique shop find, while the deliciously baroque portrait is part of Andrew Putter's 'African Hospitality' series, shot on location at Babyonstoren and which shows the cultural interplay present in colonial history.



↑ **Edwardian feel**

This magnificent wet room evokes spa-like Edwardian bathrooms. The marble double basin and taps are from a salvage building yard, the mirror was custom made, and the glass-fronted medicine cabinet is from Onsite. The rain shower is from Axor. The glass-and-wood display cabinet from a junk shop is filled with a vignette of bathroom luxuries reminiscent of an old school apothecary.

**The owner** →  
Karen Roos.

**Alfresco** →  
Summer meals are enjoyed at this alfresco dining area in the courtyard between the *voorkamer* wing and the kitchen wing.



### ↓ Garden

The love and care that goes into every aspect of the homestead at Babylonstoren is evident in the carefully clipped, undulating *taaibos* planting that adds interest on the east-facing aspect of the house. This perspective shows the courtyard that leads directly into the central sitting room. The ornate gables, white-washed walls and reed-thatch roof are signature elements of traditional Cape Dutch architecture.



#### VISIT

To make like a scion of a venerable Cape farming family and enjoy an exclusive stay at the Owners' House, contact Babylonstoren on +27 (0)21 863 3852 or visit the website: [www.babylonstoren.com](http://www.babylonstoren.com)