



STAR QUALITY
The domed astronomical observatory houses two high-tech telescopes – one for stars and planets and one for the sun.

WORDS ANDREA NAGEL PHOTOGRAPHS MARISKA VAN DEN BRINK AND DOOK

GAME FOR ADVENTURE

THERE'S NOTHING PREDICTABLE about the Leobo Private Reserve. It's an exclusive playground in the Waterberg where everything seems possible.

The custom-built brick and copper observatory at Leobo Private Reserve is just one of many quirky signs that Rory Sweet, the British IT millionaire who owns this private game farm in the Waterberg near Vaalwater, doesn't do things in half measures. He's clearly a man who knows how to have a good time – and the *lucha libre* masks and Elvis Presley wigs hanging on the 'space party' dress-up rack at the entrance to the observatory are just a few of the clues.

In true eccentric British style, Sweet has built his version of a millionaire's playground and equipped it with grown-up toys. Don't expect standard routines such as buffet meals and run-of-the-mill game drives at pre-arranged times. This is an elite hideaway where whimsy and wildness rule. For example, bush rumour has it that Sweet sends his friends out on game drive safaris on quad bikes and then takes pot shots at them with ➤

ARRIVING IN STYLE
Ringed by acacia trees, the Mercedes-Benz C-Class Estate strikes a pose.

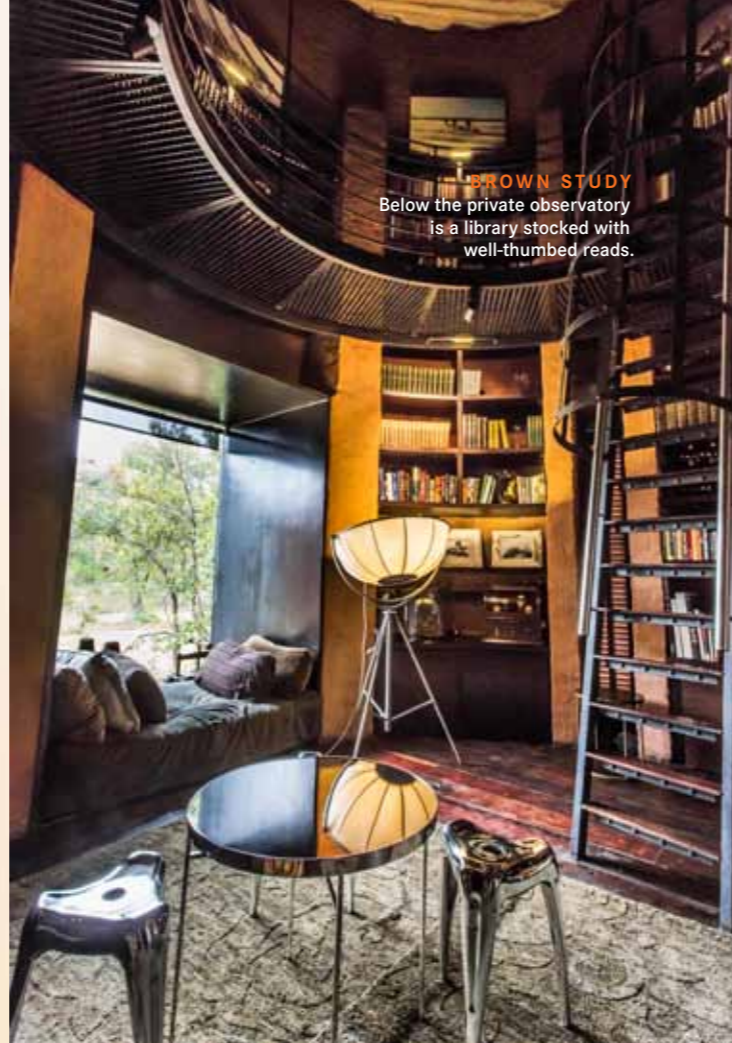


DRIVE



HIGH JINX IN THE HIGHVELD

Nothing wrong with a colourful cocktail before an evening star safari.



BROWN STUDY

Below the private observatory is a library stocked with well-thumbed reads.



TAKE A SEAT

A unique hippo bone chandelier hangs above the dining table made from locally sourced sandstone.



AFRO-TING

The sunken James-Bond style lounge has an African twist.



ORGANIC CONTOURS

An adobe-style staircase anchors the space and leads to the informal TV lounge.



STAR-STRUCK

Writer Andrea Nagel listens to astronomer Dr Phil Calcot waxing lyrical about the universe.



Find Dr Phil Calcot's list of 'what not to do' when stargazing at www.mblife.co.za <full URL to come>.

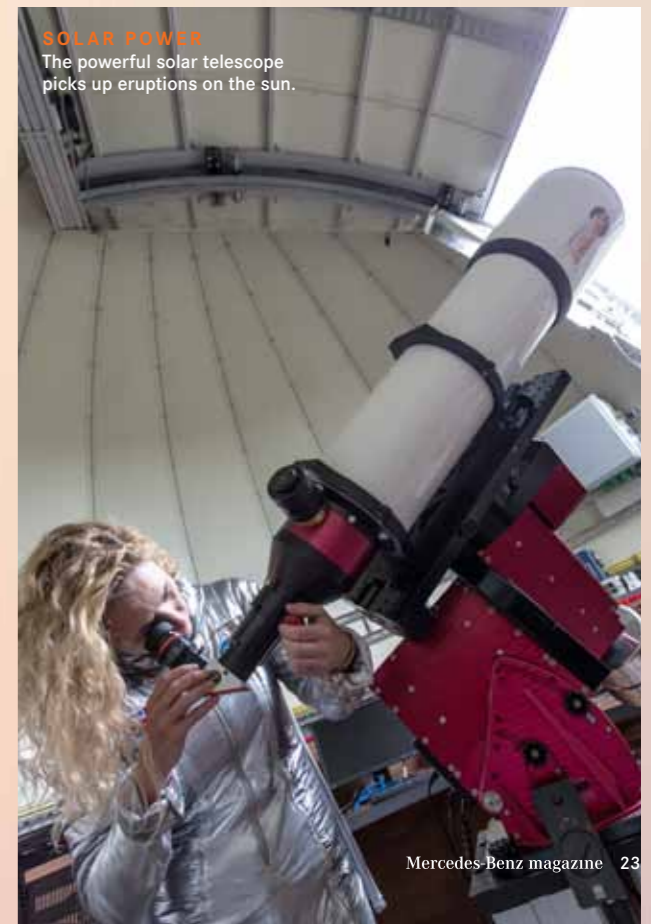
a paint ball gun from the vantage of a helicopter. His staff swear it's true.

They also explain that Sweet's personality is reflected in every aspect of Leobo's surroundings. In a fusion of super-geek and alpha male sensibilities, quad bikes and Polaris buggies are constantly on call for quick flips, and a resident crocodile named Steve is known for his mud-wrestling and champion tug-of-war skills. When it comes to the buildings though, the key words are sophistication and smart design. At Leobo, form, function and comfort fuse effortlessly.

Arriving in style

A raised wooden walkway leads to the massive ancient doors of the Observatory Villa. Inside, the decor is a mish-mash of influences: salvaged, worn Indian doors lead to the two front bedrooms with their enormous en suite bathrooms, and beaded chandeliers hang over the day beds like exotic octopus tentacles in dusty pastel shades.

The dining room table is a slab of white stone sourced from a nearby quarry and lit by globes embedded in the bleached bones of a hippo skeleton. Above the circular sunken lounge, a mezzanine level made from hand-stitched blue wildebeest hide and furnished with mountains of linen and velvet cushions reflect the colours



SOLAR POWER

The powerful solar telescope picks up eruptions on the sun.

“ THIS IS AN ELITE HIDEAWAY where whimsy and wildness rule.



FEELING TRANSPORTED
It's tough to abandon the C-Class Estate but a private chopper safari beckons.

of the distant hills turning grey, then lilac and then inky blue as the sun sets.

A mud-hut castle, the Observatory Villa sits on the highest point of a long ridge overlooking an expanse of Waterberg scrub and accommodates six adults and three or four kids. Just out of sight and a little way down a path is Leobo Lodge, a cluster of little bungalows. Both the villa and the lodge are accessed on all sides by dirt roads, rough and lumpy from weeks of summer thunderstorms. The dust-covered Mercedes-Benz C-Class Estate I'd transplanted from the city looked like it belonged next to the undulating, organic contours of the earth-coloured buildings.

Although low-profile and bumper-free, the C-Class Estate handled the approach to the lodge in style, and in air-conditioned comfort I slowed down to humour the curiosity of a tower of giraffes and let a herd of wildebeest cross the road.

Starry, starry night

That evening I'm wearing a skin-tight silver space suit and matching skull cap, relaxing on a huge marshmallow of a bed and thinking about the night sky. The dark wooden railway sleeper floors and clay-coloured walls are framed by enormous windows, and outside the African bush stretches out forever.

This darkness of the Waterberg is one of the most perfect places on earth for star-gazing. Far away from the light pollution of a city, I can see the constellations with crystal clarity. It's a moonless night, and Jupiter is centre stage. Betelgeuse, the second-brightest star in the constellation of Orion, glows orange; it's a dying star. If we're lucky, in our lifetime, it may run out of fuel and collapse under its own weight and then rebound in a spectacular supernova. The explosion would light up the night sky for weeks.

'Imagine being here in the bush at night with the sky lit by an exploding star,' says resident astronomer Dr Phil Calcot during the private starlight safari he hosted earlier in the evening. Calcot is an English academic who relocated from a small British village to the vastness of the Waterberg for love.

He knows his subject well. 'Proxima Centauri in the Alpha Centauri triple star system is the closest star to earth after the sun,' he says, laser-pointing at the studded sky. 'It's only 4.24 light years away, which means its light reaches us in just over four years. The star that's furthest away sent its light to us when cave men still roamed the earth.' His words put the vastness of the universe into perspective.

Now it's time to go inside and see the stars from a different point of view. Climbing a narrow staircase three stories high, I find myself in a hi-tech, custom-built astronomical observatory overlooking the 12-acre landscape of the reserve. It houses a NASA-grade telescope and is

DRIVE



AERIAL VIEW
Leobo's Observatory Villa, designed by architects Silvio Rech and Lesley Carstens, emerges from the Waterberg green.



LAP OF LUXE
A sleek jetty leads to a crystal-clear dam.

ENJOY IT FOR YOURSELF

Leobo Private Reserve is rented on an exclusive basis only. Guests can book the Observatory Villa, Leobo Lodge or a combination of both. The Observatory Villa accommodates nine people and Leobo Lodge accommodates 18. A private chef and butler are on hand to attend to all your needs. www.leoboprivatereserve.com
Email: reservations@leoboprivatereserve.com



It's a game Steve can't lose and he has the extra weight around his belly to prove it.

Above me, the tuk-tuk-tuk of helicopter blades signal its time for Quintus Enslin, the bare-foot helicopter pilot, to take me on a flip around the expansive reserve. I climb behind the wheel and type GPS co-ordinates into the C-Class Estate's advanced navigation system. Through mini dongas and waterfalls, navigating small ditches and hard bends, the Mercedes C-Class Estate takes the terrain in its stride, practically driving itself to the bush-style helipad – a plot of open grassland fenced in by acacia trees.

Enslin flies a convertible chopper, and at the sound of the blades a dazzle of zebra is split down the middle. A few minutes later he corrals a herd of wildebeest to show how they herd the animals to different grazing areas on the reserve.

From our privileged vantage point, we see how the Observatory Villa and Leobo Lodge blend harmoniously with the scrubby bush: the thatched roofs and tall, abode-style columns look like ancient African ruins, the illusion broken only by the infinity pool on the generous deck and a small dot of blue, the jacuzzi on the outdoor lounge, which is just visible with its bright burnt-orange cushions.

Once back on terra firma, there's a gin and tonic waiting for me on the jacuzzi deck. A striking Angus Taylor sculpture stands sentry over the last few rays of dying light. At the foot of the observatory tower, the Mercedes-Benz C-Class Estate is just in sight. It will take me back to the big city tomorrow and I'm looking forward to the scenic and stylish drive, but for now, I feel as if I've hit the 'Sweet' spot.



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C 250
Engine / Output xxxxxxx
Transmission xxxxxxx
Acceleration xxxxxxx
Top speed xxxxxxx

MAXIMUM COMFORT

Standard equipment includes Attention Assist, which warns against driver inattention or drowsiness, and Collision Prevention Assist Plus. The latter can prevent rear-end collisions at speeds of up to 40km/h and is able to perform autonomous braking at speeds of up to 200km/h.



distinguished by its copper-domed electric roof. Both dome and telescope were made in America and shipped to Africa. This extraordinary little enclave offers an added touch of precision to any astronomical musings, especially when you're dressed in a space suit. Tomorrow Calcot will open the giant copper dome again to show me the eruptions on the surface of the sun through the solar telescope. I can't wait.

A croc and a chopper

Dawn breaks. It's time for action and I'm headed towards the hippo pond, a large expanse of water flecked with lily pads and overshadowed by a shady viewing deck complete with a fully stocked bar. This is where Steve the crocodile hangs out – and where he's lured onto the banks by the occasional frozen chicken, provided angler-style by the game rangers.

Steve knows the drill, hauling himself onto the muddy embankment. He immediately launches into an impressive death roll, splashing the C-Class Estate as he thrashes around next to it. Then, after yanking the chicken clean off the line, he slinks off into the water and disappears.

“ **THE MERCEDES C-CLASS ESTATE** takes the terrain in its stride.



ROAD TO EVERYWHERE
The C-Class Estate soaks up the sandy track, flanked by rangers on quad bikes.