

BusinessDay May 2013

VOTED BEST
MAGAZINE SUPPLEMENT

Wanted

REDI
TLHABI

LOVING A TSOTSI

WALL
SPACE

THE ROOTS OF
ROBIN RHODE

WILD ONES

CUSTOM BIKES AND ROCKING THREADS

ROYAL
ENFIELD

SEEING STARS

THE OBSERVATORY, AN EXQUISITE PRIVATE HIDEAWAY IN THE WATERBERG, IS BOTH PLAYGROUND AND RETREAT

TEXT JANINE STEPHEN

SO THERE WE WERE: APPALLINGLY WELL-FED and glowing with wine, including Napoleon's solace in exile, a golden Klein Constantia Vin de Constance. It had been a ridiculously exciting 24 hours, a day to titillate the most spoiled of humans. Behind the abandoned dinner table, the Waterberg undulated in sea-green silence. The guests were, once again, exploring: this time hauling themselves up two ladders into a copper-clad dome high above the library, where a research-grade telescope blipped and whirred in search of stars. If we'd liked to, we could have pulled on a designer-made silver spacesuit first — with a badge labelled Sweet on its chest.

The badge references Rory and Liz Sweet, the owners of this private house on a 12,000-acre private reserve named Leobo (it has a good bit of game, including buffalo). Rory, a UK-based IT entrepreneur in his early 40s, is worth some £75-£100m if the rich lists have it right, and frugality doesn't appear to have been a constraint when designing his Waterberg pleasure island. Having seen their work on the Seychelles' North Island, the Sweets employed star architects Lesley Carstens and Silvio Rech, renowned for empathetic 'design based on nature', and gave them ample space to play.

The result is remarkable: a lush, organic arrangement of rooms that borrows from the idea of huts around a communal kraal. The shared living space divides master and guest bedrooms, and a round glass atrium — an aquarium of air — adds an additional bubble before an enchanting children's room and second suite. The entire 1,000m² structure, bristling with adobe brick and stone towers and furry thatch, feels both futuristic and as ancient as the Waterberg itself — the oldest sandstone mountain range on earth. "Something like Great Zimbabwe meets Timbuktu," as a friend said.

The décor too, all natural opulence and storytelling, is Carstens and Rech's work. The fabrics and materials have provenance. Beds are of salvaged Leadwood, while the copper and mahogany bar was crafted by fourth-generation Italian cabinet makers. The hippo whose skeleton has been transformed into a floating chandelier actually roamed the reserve until it was killed by a renegade rhino. Everything is tactile and sumptuous, from oiled wooden floors and copper cupboard doors to towelling massage beds in the bathroom. A hand-strung beaded chandelier drifts from the bathroom ceiling like a bushveld-hued jellyfish, and the Maymott-crocheted pouffes in the children's room suggest alien life as much as the small bushveld plants they are inspired by.

The bones and skin of the building are beautiful, but like that hippo chandelier have a wicked sense of humour. There's a plump, fabric-woven swing in a bathroom with a view and the retro Bond-evoking TV lounge has a ceiling of fringed gnu hides.

It's only now that the Sweets have decided to let their creation out to others. Quite brave, considering that a recent bachelor party saw guests don the spacesuits and take off into the bush on quad bikes. But somehow I think Rory might approve. This is a man who, after a teen crocodile started going for his bait when fishing in a reserve dam, "got the idea" of a spot of

Architects
Lesley Carstens
and Silvio Rech
designed the
Observatory
private villa

“crocodile-tug-of-war” with a piece of chicken tied to a rope.

There's been a mania for private villas in the high-end tourism sector lately, but few are as personal. The Observatory has that impossible-to-replicate feeling of a home belonging to larger-than-life people. There are snapshots of Liz and Rory in their bedroom, and framed pics of escapades with friends. Even the library contains both curated whimsy and a smattering of personal items.

This is a heavenly retreat, but one where whims are met and games encouraged. I got my adrenaline fix quad biking up a rocky incline (in plain tracksuit pants), and we also roared through a mini-marsh — the bike had to be winched free from satisfying mud some time later. There were helicopter flips for some, and target shooting for others. No pellet guns for the Sweets: the rifle was a 300 Winmag that took bullets the size of lipsticks and knocked the breath out of bystanders. And we spent a lovely sunset on the Jacuzzi deck, wrapped in blankets with ears.

It wasn't all razzmatazz, although meals were exciting thanks to the talents of Afro-fusion chef Coco Reinartz of Sel et Poivre fame in Sandton. He paired a mineral-rich Sauvignon Blanc with a caprese-inspired starter sandwiched in a crispy pastry to devastating effect, and the Wellington-style salmon fillet was exceptional.

Through all the excitement, the bushveld lapped at the edges of the Observatory, infinitely soothing. There was ample chance to wander off in search of big-eyed zebra foals or green pigeons with stripy underwear. To see dawn turn the Waterberg's waves golden-green. Or simply to float prone in the pool, staring at the copper dome of the Observatory, and let the imagination run wild.



The hippo whose skeleton has been transformed into a floating chandelier actually roamed the reserve until it was killed by a renegade rhino



The décor materials all tell a story, like the copper and mahogany bar



TRAVELLER'S NOTEBOOK

GETTING THERE

Wanted scooted to the Waterberg in 60 minutes aboard a Eurocopter AS350 B2 helicopter. Pilot David Simelane delivered a smooth ride and free game spotting. *Ultimate HELI*, 011 044 5555, www.ultimateheli.co.za
Driving from Joburg takes about four hours.

AWARDS

Architects Lesley Carstens and Silvio Rech's awards include *Tatler Travel* Most Innovative Design 1997 for North Island, Seychelles; *Visi* Designer of the Year 2011; and The Observatory itself was shortlisted in the World Architecture Festival's World Building of the Year (Villa) 2012.

ACCOMMODATION

The Observatory sleeps six adults and three children. Rates include activities, meals and most beverages. A private chef and butler will attend to your needs.

ACTIVITIES

Activities include swimming (either in the pool or a reserve dam), game drives and walks, target shooting, quad biking and star gazing from the research-grade observatory (this was not operational when *Wanted* visited due to technical problems, but alternative star gazing was arranged). The lodge has night vision equipment for game viewing, a Jacuzzi, library and excellent entertainment systems.

For bookings email reservations@fish-i.co.za or call 087 808 1513, www.leoboprivatereserve.com

Star gazing from the research-grade observatory. The swing sits in a bathroom

