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## The Orient



Caroline Hurry

CAROLINE HURRY finds a modern Mecca in [The Orient](#), a citadel less than an hour from Johannesburg and Pretoria

In the beginning was the land and a man with a vision. At the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Cobus du Plessis bought up 280 hectares of farming properties in the Crocodile River Valley to create the Francolin

Conservancy in Elandsfontein, home to three species of Francolin, several types of antelope, jackal, and caracul.



Cobus du Plessis with Mari Dartnall

He replaced the grasslands – South Africa’s most threatened biome – and built a 10-suite Moroccan-style boutique hotel for his partner Mari Dartnall and her daughter Chantel, a multi-award winning chef. Then he built a high wall around the lot.

Jaw-dropping in scope, it’s Marakesh meets the Magaliesberg with Istanbul-ish domes, towers and turrets. Baroque furnishings recall colonial India and 19<sup>th</sup> century Provence with a pinch of Pretoria. Original South African artworks adorn gracious living rooms with sweeping vistas across the veld. Ornate portals entice guests into a slower, grander age.

Mari, an avid cat conservationist who rehabilitates and re-releases caracul and other indigenous African cats, shows us to our room, the Constantinople Suite resplendent with a massive carved wooden four-poster bed.

It was the maharajah's original crib – bought on auction during one of the couple's many travels, explains Mari. It's high off the ground – apparently the slaves slept beneath it around 350 years ago. Occasionally the rooms would



Our Constantinople Suite featuring the original four poster bed that once belonged to the Maharaj.

be flooded so the sleeping maharajah and his concubines could hear if anyone tried to wade through the water. Presumably they kicked the slaves out first.

“I hope the mattress has been changed,” quips my husband.

Actually, it was one of the most comfortable beds I've ever encountered. Although, to be honest, after all the wine we consumed that night, I could have dosed down in a haystack and not known the difference. Kurtas – loose, comfy knee-length shirts popular in India and Pakistan – were provided along with slippers and the usual five-star amenities including free Wi-Fi in the rooms.



Entrance to the Tienie Pritchard Museum and gallery on the property of The Orient boutique hotel.

The exotic Moorish theme persists in the fireplaces, antique chairs, leather upholstery, brocaded fabrics, oils, objets d'art, and wooden balconies with views across the valley. Guests can rifle through collections of old, rare, and new books in the library, relax on sun loungers with brief forays into the pool to cool off on hot afternoons, or stroll the grounds where bronze Tienie Pritchard statues abound. Every room is a veritable art gallery with stunning South African pieces.

The emphasis is on laid-back leisure time – brace your bow on the archery field, swing a croquet mallet, toss your boules on one of two Pétanque courts. It's a Provençal game from the early 1900s, in case you're wondering.

Already, I'm reeling. Who knew such a place could exist, and so close to Hartbeespoort and Broederstroom, *nog*? But the best was yet to come.

Du Plessis had decided on a Chilean evening that kicked off with a short presentation on the country in the plush Le Petit Alhambra – I forgot to mention The Orient's private 20-

seater cinema with red velvet chairs, surround sound, and massive screen – while waiters served Champagne and adorable canapés of cured ham and quince, pickled anchovies, and salmon roe.

Much hilarity accompanied the wine tasting session afterwards in the 20-seater boardroom that felt more like the large study of a rich relative with its limited edition books and Persian carpets. Dinner followed with even more wine in the Restaurant Mosaic at the Orient, domain of epicurean enchantress, Chantel Dartnall. A latter day Scheherazade – beautiful, witty, wise, well-read and well-bred – Chantel’s culinary narrative captivated us all.

Like the Sultan, I found myself spellbound as she suspended my dietary resolve – a willing prisoner, I admit – in strands of edible haiku that tempted not just the taste buds, but the nose and

eyes with presentational twists and turns.



Epicurean enchantress Chantel Dartnall is a latter day Scheherazade – beautiful, witty, wise, well-read and well-bred – her culinary narrative captivated us all.



Johannes Spangenberg from Concha y Toro leads the wine tasting in the boardroom.

At least 12 Chilean vintages from Concha y Toro washed down the 12 courses and while I dutifully jotted down a few aide memoires, sadly the scribbles in my wine-soaked notebook were indecipherable by the next morning.

A few random but memorable morsels such as razor clams with horseradish mousse, lavender-scented oysters in passion fruit jelly, foie gras, quail pies,

and slow braised rabbit ravioli with pepper red wine jus, lingered in legible bites, but mostly I must rely on my memory, such as it is.



Kim and John Austen enjoying breakfast on the terrace

Snatches of recall come in phyllo parcels. Chantel describing an nyala that treated the hotel gardens like a crèche, offloading her foal in the mornings and fetching him in the late afternoon. Mari telling us about her late beloved cheetah Nandie, – What I

wouldn't give to own a cheetah! – their relationship immortalised in a statue in the hotel's Tienie Pritchard Museum. Cobus, man on a mission, enigmatic traveller, raconteur, and bon vivant, who mesmerized us all with his joie de vivre.

The evening felt like a lucid dream from Arabian Nights, albeit awash on a sea of Chilean chardonnays, pinot noirs, sauvignons and late harvest desert vintages. With five wine cellars and more than 30 000 bottles of local and international wines on the premises, there's little danger of going thirsty.

As fellow guests Kim and John Austen of Hurlingham, explained: "There's a



My sweet husband ignores the view from our balcony to take advantage of the free wi-fi in all the suites.



A private dining room at Mosaic at the Orient.

luminosity about this family that draws people in. Visitors become firm friends. It's a privilege to share in Cobus, Mari, and Chantel's magnificent creations. It's like watching self-actualisation in motion."

Reluctantly leaving this Tshwane-style Taj Mahal

– one man's architectural tribute to his living woman and their daughter – having awoken to a symphony of birdsong, weavers building nests right outside our balcony, zebra grazing in the veld, and the best Eggs Benedict on the planet, I can only concur.

**The restaurant:**Opened in 2006, Mosaic at the Orient offers booth-type seats and two private dining rooms. Décor is classical Belle Époque, inspired by Dartnall's love of Parisian restaurants. Some awards won by Dartnall and Mosaic at the Orient include South African Chef

of the Year, a Blaison from the international gastronomic society Chaîne Des Rôtisseurs (2008), American Express Platinum Fine Dining Awards every year since its inception, plus two Diners Club International Diamond Winelist Awards. Mosaic is also the only restaurant in Gauteng and North West to receive the top Inspirational Award by the Top 100 Wine Lists Quality Award. On hand to assist with the wines is sommelier Germain Lehodey, formerly of the Tour d'Argent restaurant in Paris and finalist in the Best Sommelier of the World competition. The restaurant is open for breakfast, lunch and dinner. Booking is essential. Phone: 012 371 2902/3/4/5



A Zebra grazes in the veld at The Orient.

Pictures: Peter Berg-Munch