22 March 2015 by Kate Turkington

A magic kingdom – The Orient boutique hotel near Pretoria

How can a hotel be a magic kingdom, you may wonder? Because, set in its own 280ha conservation area in the Crocodile River Valley, The Orient boutique hotel – more Indian or Moorish exotic palace than hotel – provides an enchanting experience.

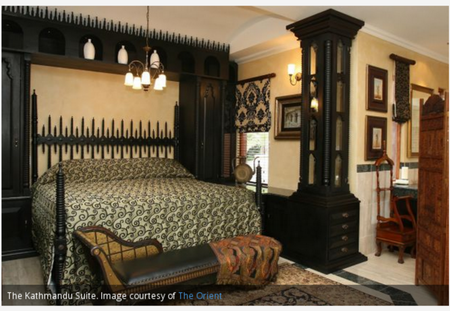
Welcome to The Orient. Image by Kate Turkington

From the moment you drive into and along the winding bush roads of the Francolin Conservancy, just a 45-minute drive from Johannesburg, and even less from Pretoria, you'll find yourself in another world – a world fashioned from the imagination and creativity of one man, his wife and a beautiful daughter.

Cobus du Plessis imagined, conceptualised and finally built The Orient boutique hotel over a decade ago. Together with his partner, Mari, they sourced furniture, doors, light fittings – everything they needed – to make a dream come true.

It could have been over-the-top, kitsch or even laughable; instead it is a triumph of form, exquisite taste and beauty.

You'll stay in one of nine themed suites uniquely named and furnished. In the Gujarat Suite, for example, you'll find treasures sourced from all over that Indian state, from old books and documents, to photographs of long-dead Indian potentates (who gaze at you solemnly from their gilded frames), to rich tapestries and hand-carved mirrors.

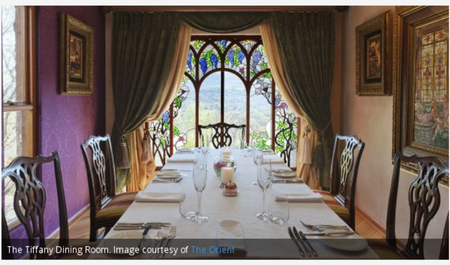


The Kathmandu Suite. Image courtesy of The Orient

No two suites are the same, so drench your senses in the Kashmir Suite, the Rajasthan Suite, the Kathmandu Suite, or any of the other inviting rooms.

The whole hotel is reminiscent of an Arabian night – Scheherazade could easily have spun some of her narrative magic here.

But there's more to The Orient than superb accommodation.



The Tiffany Dining Room. Image courtesy of The Orient

It's also the home of the award-winning Mosiac Restaurant, styled in the manner of a Parisian Belle Époque restaurant, where one of South Africa's top chefs, Chantel Dartnall, makes more magic.

Learning her craft under such culinary luminaries as chef Nico Ladenis at his London restaurant, Chez Nico (at the time one of only two chefs in London to earn three-star Michelin Guide recognition), she changes her award-winning dégustation menus to fit the season, using fresh local ingredients combined with imported ones.

Free-range lamb. Image courtesy of The Orient

The Mosaic's wine cellar is also the recipient of many awards, and Cobus himself is an acclaimed wine connoisseur, not only creator of The Orient, but also the Restaurant Mosaic's cellar master. He is a Chevalier of the L'Ordre des Coteaux de Champagne, one of the first South Africans to be inducted into this elite Champagne ordinance that dates from the Middle Ages. A visit to the wine cellar is mandatory.

But you can burn off calories early the next morning and take one of the gentle walking trails through the reserve, where you might well encounter a nibbling giraffe, a browsing antelope or any one of over 300 birds.

And there are yet more treasures in store. It's worth visiting The Orient just to see the art collection, which ranges from an impressive museum housing works of renowned South African bronze sculptor Tienie Pritchard, to original paintings by French Romantic painter Eugène Delacroix and famous South African artists like landscapist Pierneef.

The Tienie Pritchard Museum. Image by Kate Turkington