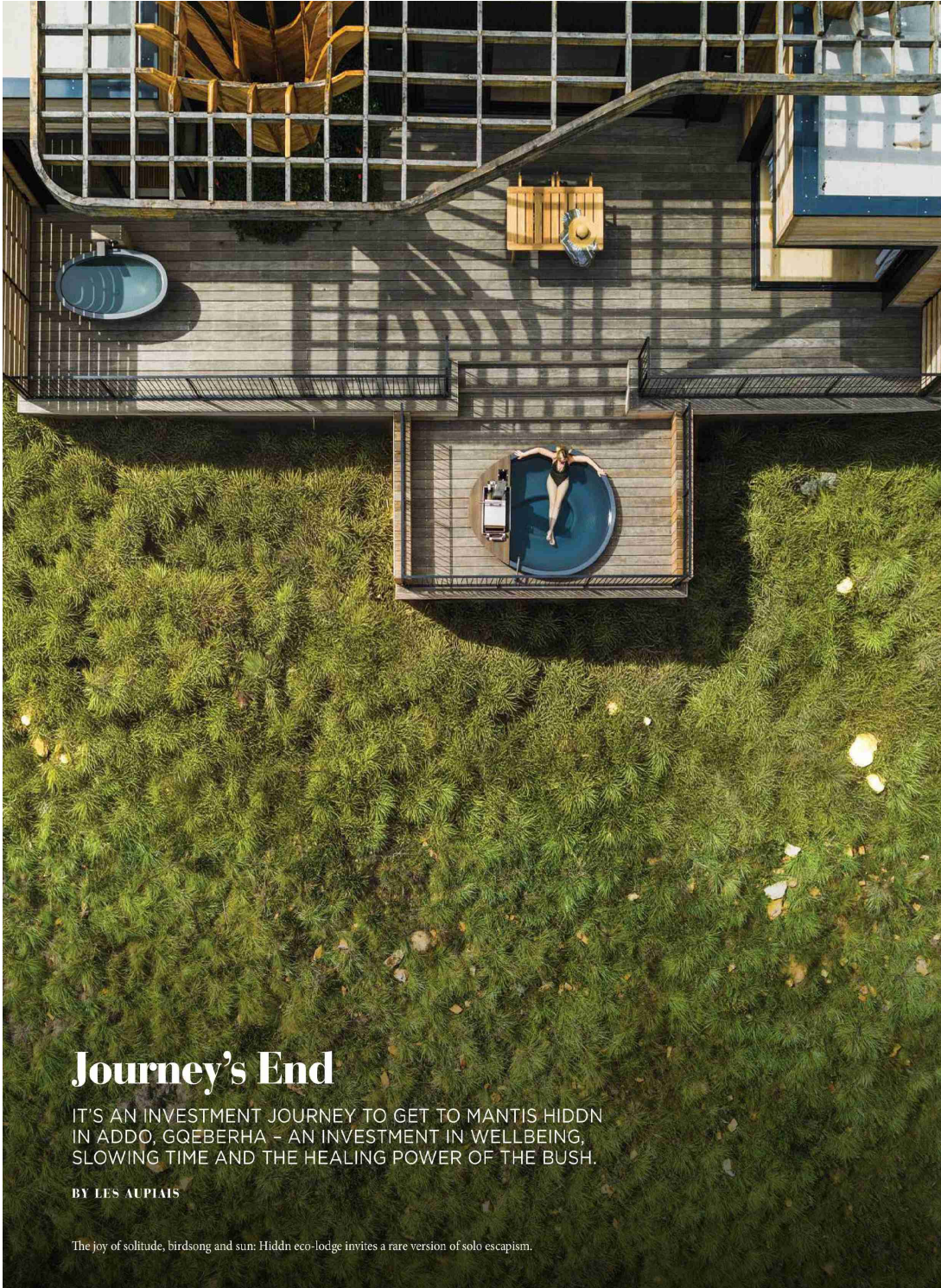




Journey's End

IT'S AN INVESTMENT JOURNEY TO GET TO MANTIS HIDDEN IN ADDO, GQEBERHA - AN INVESTMENT IN WELLBEING, SLOWING TIME AND THE HEALING POWER OF THE BUSH.

BY LES AUPIAIS

The joy of solitude, birdsong and sun: Hidden eco-lodge invites a rare version of solo escapism.

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ALAN PATON'S lyrical words about Ixopo resonate when you stand on Hiddn's elevated decks: 'These hills are grass-covered and rolling, and they are lovely beyond any singing of it.' This is the Zuurberg in the Eastern Cape, not KwaZulu-Natal, but rivals it for beauty. The land begins at your feet in an undulating khaki smudge of fynbos, and then fades to blue. There's no sign of modern infrastructure on the horizon, just a skein of distant cloud.

Hard to capture in a photograph, impossible in paint.

The watercolours wash over fine paper, a messy dabble. But an art 'experience' is part of your wellness immersion here. A clever move. You grumble mildly about something you last attempted at school, but quite suddenly, an hour has gone by and all you've thought about is how to replicate those greens, the myriad blues and purples of the scene and capturing something of the vast wild space of the surrounding 860 hectares. The painting is not gallery material, a nothing and yet something, a tactile memory of what we should do every day: dump electronics, cut the chatter, think.

Lerato Thlame, Hiddn's wellness manager, gently confiscates the work and it reappears a few days later in scroll form, bound with ribbon.

Her artistry is in designing treatments for what your body craves. A wellness experience begins with a ritual foot bathing before a body 'reading'. Her therapists interpret and heal using natural unguents and oils, and rely on 'sonic branding' to soothe you. Outside, a Levallant's cisticola calls, and then a sombre greenbul. Even an audio connection to nature is integral to how your body responds to fragrance and touch. Taste, however? Leave that to sommelier Princess Mgebisa.

She steals you away for a chocolate-and-Boplaas pairing:

2007 Colheita, a 2024 Cape vintage and the 2005 single-harvest Potstill brandy. The rich confectionery is handmade by the resident pastry chef and rolls about your mouth. Chased by the fortified wine, it morphs into a wicked nutty, fruity symphony. Princess has nothing of the aloof reserve one expects of a sommelier, and her charm and humour sweep you along as she tells her story. She confesses to being a 'hoarder' and travels South Africa looking for exceptional vintages to stock the cellar. She curates your tasting for every meal after a subtle probe at your preferences, but then surprises you with her cellar stars. Princess makes food and wine pairing suggestions, but with no pressure to dominate chef Wesley Maistry's menus.

Wesley is very taken that we share Durban roots and when I talk longingly about a 'real' KZN curry, he looks thoughtful – and a little secretive. The next day, lunch is a chicken biryani dish redolent with spices. I eat too much. The menus are largely designed around what you love and crave, but there are always surprises. What might have been a bland vegetable soup is, on this chef's watch, a carrot, cumin and 'other' blend with a slight kick that has you interrogating him about the ingredients.

That evening he brings a parcel of raw spices and curry so I can duplicate the biryani experience at home. I live in hope, but without his uncanny sense of flavour balance, it may mean a return for a masterclass.

The bar at Hiddn has its own pull. Décor draws on a restful palette of greens, but the most dramatic statement is a triple-volume wall the colour of a malachite sunbird. Barman 'Styx' Jadi makes a fine cocktail in this corner of sophistication.

There's no other way to walk off the substantial menus –



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A TIMBER 'WAFFLE' DESIGN OVER DECKS IS AN ABSTRACT TAKE ON THE YELLOWWOOD TREE



beef Wellington, crispy pork belly, chocolate fondant, dragon fruit and peach sorbet – than to head out on a ramble with Bonbon Shivambu (a surname, he says wryly, that has 'absolutely no political links').

Instead, he's a man with connections to a more authentic world, and a brilliant grasp of the reserve's birds and trees as we pass under them, reciting common names and their Latin roots. We trek from the main lodge between king protea the size of dinner plates and the orange pop of wild honeysuckle through one of six biomes in the greater area.

There are tracks: blue duiker and aardvark, wild pig and warthog. We hear birdsong, but the sombre greenbul is infuriatingly shy and hides, masked by foliage. A black-headed oriole swivels its head and calls for a mate from a bare branch backed by a perfectly blue sky.

There is purple amethyst, quartz and limestone on the paths, and sandstone that rears up through the scrubby veld grass like a dragon's spine. It was once a different Earth, violent in its early birth throes. The twin cycads along the narrow trail are likely 60 years old but still in their prime, and Bonbon reveals their curious male-female dance with insects to ensure successful pollination. In this domain, bees and flies are equally revered for their role in all the natural drama.

You sleep deeply. There is a wood-fired KolKol hot tub on the deck set up by butler Siya Velebayi, and one night, the air sharp and winter crisp, you slip into the heated water. The veld at dusk is *vert-noir* and then the night managers take over: crickets, spotted thick-knee, fiery-necked nightjar.

Finding a space this remote, this dedicated to your wellness, takes purpose. General manager Tracy Lancaster believes that the 2,5-hour journey from the airport is a travel decompression



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CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT You are never far from the landscape here. You dine in the sun's path during the day with a view over the fynbos, the Witrivier valley and distant Zuurberg; Millennia Architects created a 'waffle canopy' to allow wind to slip between the structure, which forms a framework for foliage to soften the timber silhouette; If you book a wine or brandy tasting with the sommelier, it may be around a firepit or deck where the champagne air is the perfect pairing; The suites and villas are built with maximum seclusion and privacy in mind, and all offer a sense that one is floating above a land and skyline; Every menu is a balance of comfort food, and stylish but not overly fussy plating while the chefs delight in 'surprise' elements in dishes.

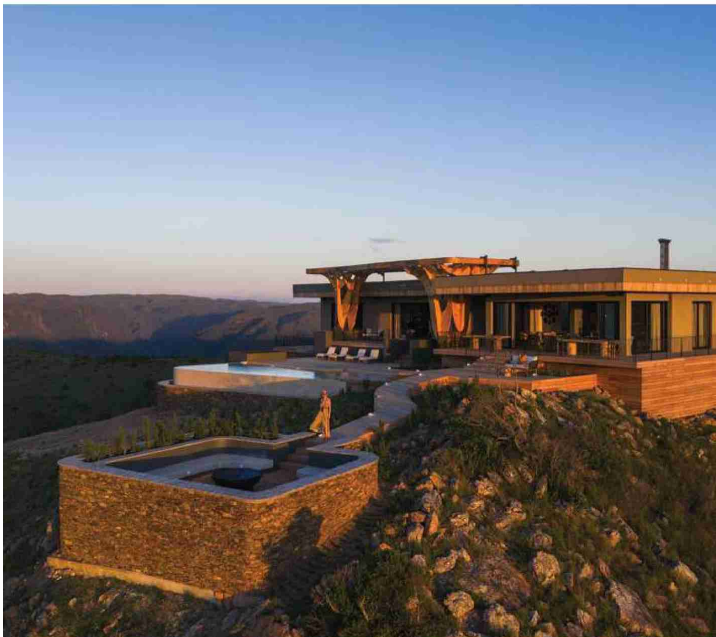
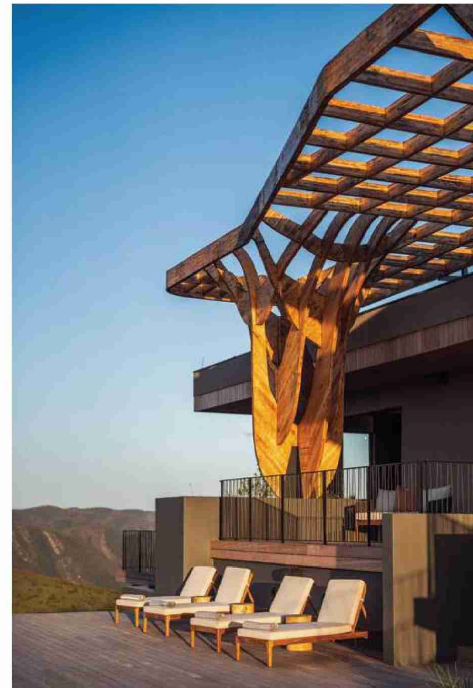
strategy: either before an upcoming safari – a blissful gap-stay in the mountains to shake off the effects of a flight – or you could return from wildlife encounters in Africa with Hiddn as your gentle landing before the journey home to ordinary life. That's the eco-lodge's greatest appeal. It demands disconnection, and taking up the offer to transfer you to and from the reserve is, in many ways, a smart move.

The road into the reserve skirts Addo Elephant Park and is not for any old dinky low-chassis runabout. This is 4x4 territory. The 'guided' approach is not just about efficiency but a means of introducing you to the terrain and architecture. Your first sighting of the lodge will be of a cluster of well-spaced angular modules that barely break the skyline and subtly blend with the fynbos.

The architectural design brief was to 'interpret stillness and celebrate the harmony between wilderness and the built form'. A timber 'waffle' design over decks is an abstract take on the yellowwood tree canopies that take root in the gorge below the lodge. The breeze passes through the lattice shape, and as the sun shifts, the broad decks are cut by patterned shadows. Soon, greenery will creep over the structure and soften the silhouette. Along with the main lodge bar and dining area, each mountain suite or villa offers guests an expansive private space, a retreat within a retreat, that's off-grid, recycles resources and harvests water sustainably.

Take it all in and breathe, just breathe. ▽

CANOPIES THAT TAKE ROOT IN THE GORGE BELOW.



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