

KWAZULU-NATAL SAFARI VILLA

A memory pond at the entrance of the rebuilt &Beyond Phinda Homestead mirrors a nearby pan – and marks the spot where a giant marula tree once stood.

PHOTOS DOOK PRODUCTION ANNEMARIE MEINTJES WORDS BIDDI RORKE

FOLLOWING a fire that tore through the heart of &Beyond Phinda Homestead two years ago, the safari villa recently reopened with a bold new look. While retaining the original footprint of the building, architect Nick Plewman cleverly re-oriented it to afford more generous under-roof outdoor space, which flows seamlessly from the interior, and front-row seats to the goings-on at the waterhole. The former pitched thatched roof was replaced with a flat steel-and-timber substructure roof. “The lodge now sits more

subtly in the environment, forming an understory between the surrounding tree canopy and the ground,” Nick says. Expansive wooden decking, undressed concrete floors, vertical eucalyptus poles and latte screens speak of Nick’s affinity for authentic materials. They don’t distract or detract from the landscape and the activity at the pan.

The memory pond at the entrance sets a meditative tone – a

gentle reminder that fire can be destructive but can lead to rebirth too. In the absence of the

once-towering marula tree, the circular aperture allows for reflections to fall on the surface of

the water and offers guests a framed view of the sky, especially magnificent on a clear night.

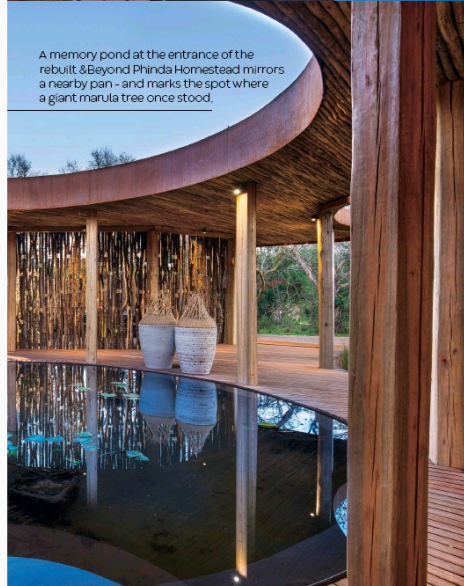
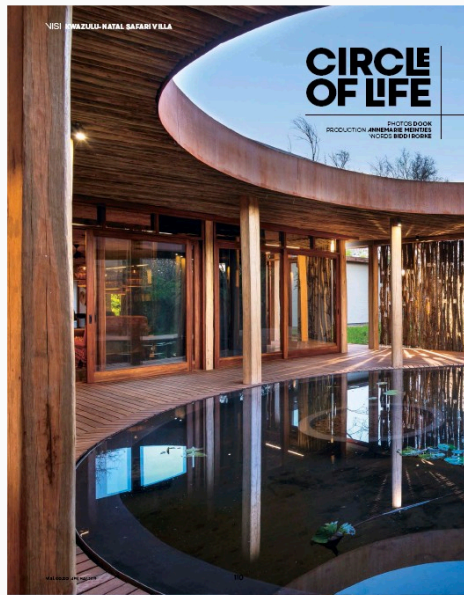


The hero of the elegant dining room is the custom-made beaded mirror from Sithabe African Craft in Cape Town. A cluster of oversized Ghanaian basket-weave pendants above the 12-seater dining table create intimacy. The striped woollen carpet is from Shuttleworth Weaving in the KwaZulu-Natal Midlands. OPENING SPREAD The memory pond at the entrance, where a towering marula tree once stood.

Inspired by this contemplative space, designer Chris Browne composed a still life of traditional and contemporary South African designs, juxtaposing Zulu pots and hanging planters with a sleek metal table. On the opposite side of the pond, three sculptural Zulu pots serve as a focal point. Large glass sliding doors give a sense of space and light, and let the colours of Africa permeate the interior whether the doors are open or closed. There's not a smidgeon of dated, overdone colonial decor in sight.

Chris is the co-owner of Fox Browne Creative, the specialist hospitality studio tasked with designing the lodge interiors. "Our brief was to recreate the magic and soul of the original lodge, but better," says Chris. "The sole-use nature of the lodge and the fact that guests who stay here are travelling together informed the homely design. We wanted to create a modern yet intimate bush home."

The choice of colours is far removed from the predictable innocuous safari-lodge neutrals. "The surrounding landscape – think flowering aloes, burnt clay and sand forest – informed the warm, spicy colour palette," says Debra Fox, co-owner of Fox Browne Creative and Chris's wife. "And we chose 100% natural materials wherever possible, balancing aesthetics with longevity and practicality. The result of this alchemy is a textured space



that offers relaxed outdoor living and that all-important kick-off-your-shoes atmosphere.

"We also wanted to showcase traditional Zulu craft in a simple, unpretentious manner, so Zulu craftwork, Nguni hides and South African art feature throughout the lodge," Debra says.

A suspended round headboard in one of the bedrooms and a hand-made round mat in the main outdoor living space repeat the circular narrative introduced by the memory pond.



Cheetah-inspired armchairs from Casamento complement the chunky coffee table, which sits below another cluster of Ghanaian basket-weave pendants. The dramatic curtains show an upscaled 18th-century archival print of fever trees, custom-made by Evolution Product. The fireplace repeats the circular motif and the predominantly black finishes of elements like the ceiling fans.

"We scoured markets and commissioned the best local weavers and artisans to work with us on the project," Chris says.

And while some of the furnishings bring in subtle references to design of the '80s, the retro feel is offset by contemporary pieces that reinforce the fact that this villa is designed for guests with an eye for the unusual who are seeking an uncommon bush retreat. andbeyond.com/our-lodges/africa/south-africa/kwazulu-natal/phinda-private-game-reserve/andbe-