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NEWT

TEXT GABBY DEEMING | PHOTOGRAPHS ALICIA TAYLOR

TRICKS

With its singular interiors and extensive gardens and orchards, Somerset's The Newt reflects the vision of its owners, the South African founders of Cape Dutch hotel and farm Babylonstoren

DRAWING ROOM With a south-east-facing window that looks out over the croquet lawn, this absinth-green panelled room has its original egg and dart moulding. It is hung with portraits of the house's former residents from the Hobhouse family, which were discovered in the cellar



BAR (*above*) This spacious room is furnished with chairs designed by Sebastian Herkner for Ames. LIBRARY (*opposite*) Demonstrating her skill at mixing the old with the new, Karen has chosen 'Josephine' sofas, designed by Gordon Guillaumier, and 'Antibodi' chairs by Patricia Urquiola, all from Moroso. The open book features crops of paintings from the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam; it inspired Karen to create some of the artwork in the Bar – traditionally framed crops of the Hobhouse family portraits hung in the Drawing Room



HADSPEN BATHROOM Many of the original features of the Georgian house have been retained in the en-suite bathrooms, including this chimneypiece with Delft tiles



GRANARY BEDROOM (*left and below*) One of the rooms in the Stable Yard, this converted Georgian outbuilding in Hadsphen stone has a futon-style bed and a shower room concealed under the granary floor. **BAR TERRACE** (*right*) The Bar and Croquet Lounge lead out to this garden terrace, with Ames 'Circo' chairs



DINING ROOM (*left*) Karen is keen for guests to dress for dinner in this panelled room, which is the more formal of two restaurants. **HADSPEN BEDROOMS** (*right and below*) All the rooms in the house are different and some have garden views





CROQUET LOUNGE (above) Designed for fun, this has a vintage record player and a stack of records. Karen chose the Moroso chairs because the colours reminded her of those painted on a croquet set. **GARDEN** (opposite) This is the south-easterly view from Hadsphen House, down the lawns and past the Victorian bathing pond. Out of sight to the left is The Newt's Parabola, an egg-shaped walled garden planted with 450 trained apple trees. Hotel guests can roam the woodlands, pick up an ice cream from a thatched gardener's cottage or take a guided forest walk



ask anyone who has stayed at Babylonstoren in South Africa's Cape to describe it and you will be rewarded with a flurry of superlatives. Much more than a hotel, the 18th-century farm estate houses an award-winning winery, restaurant and garden, all tied up in a very stylish bow by one of its founders, Karen Roos.

Now she and her husband, Koos Bekker, are taking on England with the launch of The Newt, a hotel set in over 30 acres of garden and hundreds of acres of woodland and farmland near Bruton in Somerset. Six years in the making, Hadsphen House and the Emily Estate were originally bought by the couple as a private home. 'My husband wanted an agricultural location close to London, which is hard to find,' says Karen. 'I'd read a lot of English literary classics set in this part of the country and had fallen for Bath. We chose this area because it felt familiar somehow. When we found Hadsphen, it seemed perfect.'

As the full scope of possibilities offered by the house, its outbuildings and its land began to reveal themselves, it became clear that it had to be more than a private house. The fruits of their remarkable vision are now (in every sense) open for all to see. Much has already been written about the astonishing gardens, which opened in the summer and include 3,500 apple trees numbering more than 500 varieties among them. Many of these were being used to make the cider for which The Newt was becoming known even before the hotel's rooms, restaurants and spa opened in August.

Despite Karen's love of the English country-house look, she had no desire to recreate it and you will not find any chintz curtains or cushions here. A former editor-in-chief of South African *Elle Decoration*, she knows her style strengths and has brought light touches of that country in the whitewashed beams and the chalk-coloured paint of the Stable Rooms, and in the playfulness of modern furniture from brands such as Moroso, Tom Dixon and Moooi. 'These outside spaces didn't intimidate me,' Karen says of The Newt's Granary, Stable and Hayloft. 'They weren't ever

used as rooms and were very rundown but bursting with character, which offered me complete decorative freedom.'

The main house was a more daunting prospect. It had been carved up by the previous owners and trying to imagine it as one space – and as a hotel – brought with it a particular set of demands. Karen cites the film *Gosford Park* as an influence, but it was downstairs, not upstairs, that sparked her imagination.

Bedrooms in the main house are shuttered and panelled, and while some have an antique painting or a mirror, they are all relatively spare. Karen describes them as 'places of calm and comfort, where the mind can feel clear'. She loves the way the English congregate in a bar, so this and the vast open kitchen are the lively heart of the house. 'It is really important that guests can watch the chefs cooking in this amazing space,' she explains.

As she walks round the hotel, nothing escapes her scrutiny – a twist of a chair here, a table moved a few inches to the left. It is a stylist's eye at work. There is a seating area in the garden that feels almost Parisian, perhaps because it was designed by a French architect. 'I asked Patrice Taravella to mix the gravel to the same recipe as that in the Luxembourg Gardens,' says Karen.

Many talented hands have been involved, yet it is the result of a singular vision. When asked how she managed people across so many disciplines, Karen compares it to editing a magazine: 'You choose your experts – people with the strengths you lack – and then you orchestrate them to make a whole. You have to be completely clear about what your style is – you can never let go of one little piece.' And the part her husband plays? 'Koos has the courage. We had arguments every day about the architecture, but he is not scared of anything. He gives me the confidence I need.'

Having never worked in hospitality before Babylonstoren, Karen was not prepared for the reality of guests, but her feelings took her by surprise: 'The moment it was all complete, I thought I'd want to run away. But there is an energy that comes back from the people

– you watch them investigating every corner and enjoying what they find.' And now Karen and Koos can enjoy this feeling all over again as guests explore their remarkable new world □

Rooms at The Newt in Somerset cost from £320 a night, B&B. 01963 577777; thenewtinsomerset.com

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