

MISTY MAGOEBASKLOOF

On Tuesday, 3 February '09, Hein and I decided on impulse to 'pamper' ourselves with a catered weekend. A weekend where I don't have to plan for a meal or have to don my yellow plastics to do the wash-up. Just to relax for a bit.

We decided on Magoebaskloof Hotel (www.magoebaskloof.co.za) – we were there about 5 years ago, but haven't explored that area yet. Magoebaskloof is just outside, Tzaneen, about 358 km from Johannesburg, in the Limpopo area.

We booked from Saturday, 7 tot Monday 9 February – dinner/bed/breakfast.

At half past 4 on Saturday morning, we woke up, had some coffee, packed clothes, camera and books and left after 5. The air was crisp and fresh and traffic light.

There are 2 routes to Magoebaskloof – one via Lydenburg and Hoedspruit – the other via Bela Bela (Warmbaths) and Pietersburg. We took the Bela Bela option. For breakfast, we stopped at the Petroport Bridge and had a Steers breakfast.

In Pietersburg, we were thirsty and wanted to buy a juice at the McDonalds drive-thru. The cars didn't move forward at all. We stopped, walked into the McDonalds but that didn't work either – no service at all! Juices were bought at the petrol station.

Close to Magoebaskloof, we were amazed at what looked like St Joseph lilies. They were everywhere – in the grass, on the banks next to the road ... growing wild. Some of the local youngsters sell them in bunches next to the road.

We arrive at the hotel after 10 – but check-in time was only at 12, so we had our first view of the valley. Absolutely breathtaking. And actually quite chilly! Luckily one of my coffee friends advised me to bring along jackets. I was actually so chilly, I had a nice cappuccino to warm me. A few motorcycle bikers joined us on the patio for a 'brandy and coke', had a few jokes amongst themselves and left again for the next pub.

Magoebaskloof Hotel burnt down in 2004 and was rebuilt with a few alterations. A lovely mural (right) has been painted on the one outside wall, with 'doors' and 'windows' and lovely trees in pots. Also a working water wheel. Now I grew up with a water wheel in Paarl, my hometown. But a 20-something lad walked up to the wheel and was totally and utterly fascinated by it. He reversed the wheel's direction – called his mate and showed him the wheel. He must have stood there for about 15 minutes – entranced.



The pub is called 'The Phoenix and the Fireman'. It's lovely inside – old photo's, copper pans, lovely big fireplace for the cold days BUT you are not allowed to smoke in there. Now, that just doesn't feel right. It's like you walk into a coffee shop, order a strong, aromatic coffee but they don't serve cakes???

We had a light lunch – I had chicken, brie, tomato & basil on a baguette and Hein had steak, egg and chips. By that time our room was ready.

There are quite a few different options – some rooms are all in one building, overlooking the swimming pool and down the valley. There are a few big houses and then there are small 2-storey buildings with only 3 rooms. The luxury rooms. Our room was on the top floor with a lovely patio and view, although not looking directly down the valley. Big bathroom with a corner bath and shower, separate toilet, double bed and a sofa.

There were 3 wardrobes, filled with enough hangers and when we took off the quilt, we found 2 very very heavy blankets on the bed. Hmmm, do they expect cold nights?



Also a stern warning to keep all doors and windows closed when out, since the monkeys love to snoop around.

Tea/coffee making facilities, ice cubes (for room service I presume) and 4 of the most delightful biscuits. I'm not 100% sure, but think they were Greek almond biscuits. Filled with nuts and loads of icing sugar all around – drenching your clothes and carpet in white...



Have you experienced that a lot of hotels/guest houses are furnished with light curtains – breezy and airy, but not dark enough for an afternoon nap? So I bought us both eye masks (used in planes mostly). Having regular nightmares, waking up and seeing things in the room (usually a towel over the door), I thought an eye mask might be my solution. We slept for 3 hours!

Tea and some of those gorgeous biscuits refreshed us for dinner.

The dinner part of the d/b/b package, was advertised as 5-course. We were a bit dubious, but nevertheless...



Quite a lovely big dining room with beautifully painted canvases (left), grass plates and some eerie masks. We ordered some red wine and still water and were handed the menu.

Starters were a choice of:

Garnished mango fan with shrimps with a lightly spiced sauce of mayonnaise, tomato sauce, Worcestershire sauce and fresh horseradish. (That was my choice). And it came with a cute little heart made of red caviar. It was nice, the mango a bit green still.



The knives were very uncomfortable – the handles were too thin to hold, so the blade side swivels around (bottom). We asked for steak knives.



Hein's choice was:

Meatballs in a delicate white wine sauce flavored with pickled capers. He loved it and also loved the capers – it does require a certain palate. (For years I thought capers were fish ...)



The next course was *Traditional Bavarian Pea soup with crisp fried bacon.* We both ordered that. It looked lovely and I could see the crispy bacon – but when I had my first mouthful, it was a bit disconcerting ... when I tasted again, I told Hein the soup tastes of mealie meal. He looked at me and said that he smelled it when they put it in front of him. Interesting taste – it made the soup quite thick. When Mignon, the maitre'd came along, we asked her – and she absolutely and vehemently denied it. I'm sorry, but we both couldn't have been wrong.

Next course was a choice between:

Tender grilled chicken breasts served on a julienne of garden vegetables with a rich red wine and port sauce. Hein chose that. He loved it, thought the sauce was ok and even from across the table, I could see the tenderness of the chicken.





My choice was:

Pan-fried fillet of trout topped with capers and lemon segments in lemon butter sauce. Very yummy and tasty. Lovely!! Both were served with potatoes, green beans (extremely salty) and glazed carrots. I still had to save space for course 4 (desserts) and 5 (cheese and biscuits), so I only had half of my trout.

Dessert and cheese were buffet-style. There were mini lemon meringue tarts, some creamy, orangey concoction, chocolate mousse and carrot cake. I had a lemon meringue tart and a bite each of the creamy, orangey and the chocolate mousse. The lemon meringue was

very nice, but the other 2 a bit 'flat'.

Cheeses were the normal variety of soft, hard and smelly – served with different biscuits and fresh fruit. 4 Bites of the cheeses and that was it for me. When we asked for the drinks-bill, instead of mints, we were given 2 nougat sweets from the Coach House, a nearby hotel & spa with a nougat kitchen. Yum!

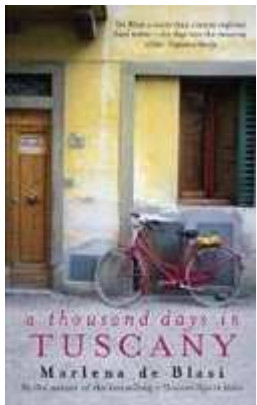
It was quite cold by then – and we were thankful for the heavy blankets on the bed.

Somewhere during the night, the rain started. Just a steady tip-tip.

When we woke at 6 on Sunday and opened our patio door – we could barely see the rest of the hotel. Fog all around and the soft but steady tip-tip of rain. Hot chocolate and coffee warmed us. We got back in bed, I phoned my mom to wish her happy birthday and we read a bit.



Travel is in my blood, therefore I also love to read travel stories. Especially the Tuscan and Provence ones. Before the weekend, I visited my library, found 2 novels and browsed through their 'for sale – R5' books. And then my eyes fell on this beaut – *A Thousand days in Tuscany* – *Marlena de Blasi*. FOR FIVE RANDS!!!! It was meant to be.



So I started to read my 'fund' and at one stage, laughed so loud, I had to tell Hein. And I thought I'll share it with you:

Marlena and her husband Fernando were married 3 years ago. They stayed in Venice for 3 years, or a thousand days. Her husband left his bank job, sold their house and they rented a house in Tuscany:

While they were doing shopping in the small village, they asked for eggs – and were directed to the henhouse.

"I have never before gathered eggs from under a hen. Fernando has never before seen a hen. We bend low into the shed where perch a dozen or so fat lady birds. There's no shrieking or fluttering at all. I approach one and ask her if she has an egg or two.

Nothing. I ask in Italian. Still nothing. I ask Fernando to pick her up but he's already outside the shed smoking and pacing, telling me he really doesn't like eggs at all and he especially doesn't like frittata. Both bold-faced lies.

I start to move the hen and she plumps down from her perch quite voluntarily, uncovering the place where two lovely brown eggs sit. I take them, one at a time, bend down and nestle them in my sack. I want two more. I peruse the room. I choose the hen who sits next to the docile one. I pick her up and she pecks me so hard on my wrist that I drop her. I see there is nothing in her nest and apologize for my insensitivity, thinking her nastiness must have been caused by embarrassment."

Breakfast was just the normal buffet – lovely mince, pork sausages, bacon, French toast, preserves, cheeses, pastries, etc.

After breakfast, we wanted to explore a bit. When we were at Magoebaskloof years ago, we were invited by a company to enjoy an air show. Our GPS, Suzy, was asked to find the shortest route to the airfield. Which she promptly did.



And we ended up on a yellow muddy, slippery road – driving very, very carefully. One slide and we would end up down the valley.

Magoebaskloof tea was enjoyed to still our fluttering hearts at Pekoe View (above centre). Very quiet at that stage, but with a beautiful view. Look at my poor car's tires – all caked in mud.



A notice for the Debengeni Waterfall was noticed – we paid R30 entry fees. Luckily I was wearing $\frac{3}{4}$ jeans but oh dear – paired with very high wedge sandals. Not wanting to break an ankle, I promptly removed my sandals and walked barefoot. What a sight! Although we were standing about 10 metres away from the fall, we could feel the mist. Neatly-maintained picnic benches, tables and fireplaces were placed underneath the trees. The falls cascaded into a river flowing down over the rocks. Peaceful and quiet.



Driving back, 'moss beards' were hanging from branches. Isn't this a lovely close-up of the lily? When I asked the lady, she said it's actually a wild St Josef lily. Can you just imagine that? St Josef lilies growing wild – but only in Magoebaskloof area.



Lunch at 'The Phoenix and the Fireman' pub was something light for me (ok, yeah, it was another breakfast - scrambled eggs, mushrooms, bacon and toast) and a cheese burger for Hein. By now the fog and rain had disappeared and the weather was mild.

My eye mask was to be tested again. And it worked – again. Although our nap was only an hour or so. The 'Greek' biscuits called me, I tested them and yes, they're still very fine biscuits.



Still too early for dinner and feeling a bit restless, we went for another drive. This time to the Ebenezer Dam. Quite a drive through a lovely dense forest, past sawmills and then the dam. Although we could see houses, chalets and roads – we couldn't find the road leading to the



waters' edge. We did see the yacht club and some boats resting on the water.

Dressing for dinner, I had to admit to not being very hungry at all.



Dinner was very quiet, so we were giving an a la carte menu to choose from. Chicken livers were ordered and it was very good. Served on a poppadum with some chilli heat and enjoyed with a fresh bun.

Hein ordered a fillet with a Madagascar green peppercorn sauce and enjoyed it thoroughly. I had a bite and it was quite juicy and tender.

Having spied a cheesecake at the buffet, I tried it. Mistake. Very bland, a bit 'salty?' and very gelatine-ish. An apple and pecan nut pie I tried next – quite nice. But the cheeses all looked 'sweaty' and the biscuits were soft. A Sunday night buffet seemed to be a bit slap-dashy.

But the coffee was magnificent. Not pot coffee, freshly prepared machine coffee. Hmmm.

Monday morning woke us with a sunny sky and a promise of heat. Around 8 we left the hotel and had breakfast at Café Rossini in Pietersburg.

Arrived home at 1, unpacked, washed clothes and caught up on emails while Hein went to a Sandton meeting.

And what did we do on Monday night?

We lit the fire to braai chicken pieces and watch dvd's.



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