

The Karoo with a twist - shaken... and stirred

The Karoo Theatrical Hotel outside Steytleville is to the Karoo what the Beacon Island Hotel is to the Garden Route - a signal that, as a tourist, you have arrived at the cherry on top. CXPRESS spent a weekend with the two talented gentlemen who made this country gem their final destination.

AFTER trekking through the countryside, one doesn't just pull up in front of the Karoo Theatrical Hotel - one arrives, and stands in wonder at the statement this farm-style oasis makes, its art deco-style architecture reminiscent of an era long gone. With the word 'theatrical' in

mind, the look of the building certainly plays its part. However, after all the word-of-mouth reports on the stars of the regular cabaret shows held here, owners Mark Hinds and partner Jacques Rabie came across, well, rather 'normal' when welcoming us onto the comfortable stoep at the hotel entrance.

Lazing about in shorts, t-shirts and flip-flops for the duration of our weekend stay - bar one occasion - Mark and Jacques turned out to be masters of laid-back hospitality.

Before even thinking of booking in, we were immersed in a long, lazy Karoo afternoon stoep chat about life, the universe and everything - totally devoid of the inflated flamboyance expected to accompany all things theatrical.

First up for discussion was the transformation of the hotel - built in 1943 - by Mark and Jacques seven years ago.

South African Breweries was responsible for a scattering of branded hotels all over the country, advertising trademarks like 'Castle' on its exterior. Royal Hotels became the norm in almost every decent-sized *dorp* in SA, however, Steytleville's Royal was put on auction after it went belly-up in 2002.

Mark and Jacques came scouting from Cape Town, made an offer... and the rest is history.

In the time it took to strike the deal, the instant realisation dawned that they had now become hoteliers. They had reached their final destination and gave birth to the regaled Karoo Theatrical Hotel - in the middle of nowhere.

Naturally, there were varied reactions from the local fraternity. They say behind every man, there's a woman with raised eyebrows...

Not unaware of local sentiments, Mark wrote in one of his stoep stories, entitled *A time to delight in what we have*: "Each moment of life is a gift of value beyond our understanding, each moment allows us to make accessible whatever we desire, depending on the attitude with which we respond and react to situations."

Today, this welcoming haven comprises a fully licensed bar with full-size snooker table, 11 stylishly decorated bedrooms, budget backpacker units, a camping ground, a crystal blue swimming pool, a putt-putt course and a fully equipped gym, as well as a Jacuzzi and sauna. Basics like lounges with fireplaces and Internet access complete the expectations of most guests.

With the aesthetics taken care of Mark sat back and, being a bit of a businessman in disguise, realised that they had to make a living in these harsh terrains. Many of us don't possess real

talent, and survival plans based on acquired life skills once semi-retired can take up the rest of a lifetime.

But Mark just happens to be a concert pianist and professional entertainer, having worked in theatre in Europe for 20 years. All he needed was an exceptional singer... Meanwhile, Jacques applied himself in the kitchen and budded, bloomed, and ultimately blossomed into a most exciting experimental cook.

It was during Jacques' singing-in-the-kitchen-while-cooking flourish that Mark - sitting on the stoep and savouring the essence of a magnificent Karoo night - overheard his partner's perfect pitch.

"All of a sudden I realised I have the singer I wished for, right here!" remembered Mark. It turned out that his life partner was born a singer, even though he started life completely deaf. Only when his parents could afford the experimental insertion of a mechanical device was Jacques able to hear.

Long hours were spent rehearsing and finally the guys were ready to perform their now well-known cabaret shows in the heart of the Karoo.

Said Jacques: "Word travelled, visitors flocked, accolades abounded... the show went on and on and on!"

By now we were experiencing a true sense of an-ti-ci-pa-tion as we started relishing our weekend of relaxation - drinks in the bar, swimming in the pool, home-cooked food, and a cabaret show by our hosts.

Saturday afternoon, while lazing on the stoep, Jacques busied himself by painting his nails - all 20 top to bottom - while relaying the intense process of "turning into a drag queen". A true master of his art, he dresses himself (like any big boy should), does his own makeup, designs AND makes his own costumes, and has a huge variety of wigs - believe it or not, also self-made.

With an eye to the heavens he mumbled something along the lines of "I have to prep tonight's dinner, and then, oh dear, I still have to wax!"

"Why wax?" Mark asked. "Liewe Hemel," retorted Jacques, "I can't go on stage tonight in my g-string looking like THIS!"

This exchange might have shocked some first-time visitors (and excited others), but it just added to our anticipation.

Hotel guests during our stay



WELCOMING: The Karoo Theatrical Hotel exudes old-style charm; below is a glimpse of its inviting foyer



ENTERTAINERS: Jacques in full costume as Dame Leyla Lemborjini, top, is accompanied by Mark on piano; above, the duo back to earth during their final set when Jacques sheds his feathers - here with one of the adopted family pets on stage

included a subdued group of German adventure motorcycle tourists, two Scandinavian business partners, and a rather conservative-looking middle-aged couple from Pretoria.

After an afternoon spent reading alongside the pool before a restoring beauty nap, we were ushered into the theatrically-decorated dining room-cum-theatre, aptly named *Grimaldi's Theatre Hall*.

One minute Jacques, still in slacks, was serving a delicious meal by candlelight, and the next... the stage lights beamed up revealing a grand piano (there are five playing pianos dotted around the place) and Mark dressed in a stylish dinner jacket - a far cry from his daily leisure wear.

His piano playing is indescribably beautiful and as the 'storyteller' of the performance, he exuded entertainer deluxe. When he introduced Dame Leyla Lemborjini to the stage and a transformed Jacques made his entrance, a feeling of astounded wonder brought a lump to many a throat.

"He has such lovely legs, and I ADORE his shoes," our friend Linda gushed, as Dame Leyla delivered her entrance song.

The voice, costume, makeup,

and passion of this genuine dra artist enthralled the small audience - even the conservative lady from Pretoria was seen tapping her feet.

Just before the show, Mark told us that the show actually carried a profound but subtle message, and asked us to tell him afterwards whether we had picked up on it.

During the final set, Dame Leyla shed her appearance by first plucking off her wig and jewellery, then finally her costume - and the real Jacques, in shorts, t-shirt and flip-flops reappeared. Together our grand hosts performed their final song, *Somewhere Over the Rainbow*, revealing their subtle message of social acceptance and appreciation "... why, oh why, can't WE?"

Of course you can! The show must go on, yes?

The story of Mark and Jacques and the Karoo Theatrical Hotel is a story of note (no pun intended), and should you wish to experience this creative duo be sure to attend their rather bold and unique all-night dance party, Queen of the Desert, on Saturday October 3.

See the notice on this page for contact details and additional information.

Sharing is caring

Jacques and Mark are also passionate about animals, and have adopted around 18 cats and three dogs from the neighbouring surrounds. In their efforts against animal cruelty, they were recently invited to perform at the PE Opera House in a fund raising show, which managed to raise R40 000.



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